CHAPTER 3

Presence of the Past
The physical and social changes, the new nationalism, the genteel tradition, and cosmopolitanism were cultural conditions that prepared the way for the American Renaissance, but it was a new sense of history that most directly formed the mental set of the American Renaissance. One element of American mythology has always been the American Adam stepping ashore at Jamestown or Plymouth without a past. Alternatively, there were those Americans who, from the very beginning, attempted to record and preserve selected aspects of the past. In the 1870s a change took place, and Americans discovered that history did not mean the far distant Holy Land, Greece, Rome, local genealogy, and a few selected Revolutionary heroes, but that a more immediate past existed in both European and American history.

Discovery of the concept of the Renaissance as a historical-cultural event occurred in the mid and later nineteenth century. The word “Renaissance,” referring to the Italian revival of classic antiquity in art, architecture, and letters in the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, first came into English usage in the 1840s. For many English commentators and artists attracted by the Middle Ages, and especially the Gothic past, the classical Renaissance was an anathema, a modern revival of paganism. John Ruskin and his disciples of the 1850s and 1860s such as James Jackson Jarves, Charles Eliot Norton, and Russell Sturgis led the way. While Ruskin could admit a small amount of genius in the Pre-Raphaelite Renaissance, in his view the high point of culture and civilization occurred in late medieval Venice and Pisa.

Beginning in the 1870s, books and articles appeared that viewed the Renaissance period in a positive light and set in motion the American infatuation with it. Several books were of particular importance: two by Englishmen, Walter Pater’s Studies in the History of the Renaissance (1873) and John Addington Symonds’s The Renaissance in Italy, The Fine Arts (1877; the third volume of a five-part work), and two by the Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt, The Cicerone: A Guide to the Works of Art in Italy (1873; originally published in German in 1855) and The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1878; originally published in German in 1860). Unifying the different approaches was the theme that a high point of Western civilization, especially in the arts, occurred in Italy during the Renaissance. American reaction in general was positive; a reviewer of Symonds claimed that the “mark” of the Renaissance could be found not only in Italy “but upon the productions of the whole Western World” and that the artistic force of Greece, which Symonds saw as the generating element of the Renaissance, “is travelling onward with ever-increasing vigor along a path which is constantly tending upwards, but whose end is lost in the dim distance of the future.” A reviewer of Burckhardt for the New York Herald claimed: “We are children of the Renaissance. And not only are we children of the Renaissance, but as Burckhardt truly says the influence of that mother age is still at work among us.”

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3 The Art Interchange 2 (May 14, 1879), p. 81.
4 New York Herald, October 18, 1880.
Other publications appeared in the late 1870s, the 1880s, and the 1890s that further served to bring the Renaissance into perspective. In popular magazines such as Scribner’s, there were articles on pictures of the French Renaissance, Savonarola, Leonardo da Vinci, and others. Former medievalists and followers of Ruskin frequently reoriented their assessment of the Renaissance. Charles C. Perkins, a Bostonian and prolific writer on the arts, published in 1878 Raphael and Michelangelo: A Critical and Biographical Essay, and then in 1883, Historical Handbook of Italian Sculpture. William James Stillman, the editor of the very Ruskinian art journal The Crayon (1855–1861) and a personal friend of the master, became less enamored in his later years and wrote on the importance of the Renaissance. For The Century Magazine Stillman prepared notes to accompany a series of engravings by Timothy Cole that were later published under the title Old Italian Masters (1892). At Yale University, James M. Hoppin, an avowed “true disciple” of Ruskin, felt the need to correct him and claimed: “The Early Renaissance [of Florence, 1420–1500] may be compared to morning after night—the night of barbarism, ignorance and intellectual bondage.”

Simultaneous with the discovery of the Renaissance by historians and critics, American artists who had been studying at various European academies returned with new knowledge. Italy had earlier been a popular spot for work by American artists, but mainly for the poetry of ruins and atmosphere, not for any concentrated, intense study of the Renaissance period. The generation of American artists that returned home in the 1870s and 1880s learned about the Renaissance through art schools in Dusseldorf, Munich, The Hague, and Paris. Differences existed between the academies, between instructors, and certainly students absorbed and carried away different emphases. In general, however, most of the academies saw the fountainhead of modern art as the Florence and Rome of the Renaissance. Hence the various prizes and the national academies in Rome.

Paris and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts were the most popular places to study, and there American students were exposed to the architecture of the Italian Renaissance through the lavish envoi drawings of Prix de Rome winners or the accurate steel plate renderings of elevations and details of the Palazzo Cancelleria in Paul Marie Letaurouilly’s Edifices de Rome moderne (1840–1857) or the Pitti Palace in Auguste Grandjean de Montigny’s Architecture Toscaune (1815). Augustus Saint-Gaudens studied in the atelier of François Jouffroy, who led the movement away from cold neoclassicism to the naturalism of the Italian Renaissance. Painters such as Walter Gay, Henry O. Walker, and Edwin H. Blashfield studied in the atelier of Léon Bonnat, who in his salon pictures openly quoted from Velazquez and Michelangelo. Jean León Gérôme, known for convincing historical illustration, attracted the largest contingent: Kenyon Cox, Thomas Eakins, Abbott Thayer, George de Forest Brush, Robert Blum, and others.

Not every American artist and architect studied on the continent, and in England a sizable group paused—at least briefly—and discovered the Renaissance. The Pre-Raphaelite movement and its successor, the Aesthetic movement, were important in awakening Americans to the art of decoration and also in directing them towards their own Colonial past and ultimately to

6 James M. Hoppin, The Early Renaissance and other Essays on Art Subjects (Boston, 1892), pp. iii, 8.
the Italian Renaissance. Painters such as Frederic Leighton, Alma-Tadema, Edward John Poynter, and Albert Moore exploited Greek and Roman motifs in their work. The vast decorative program and historical paintings for the Houses of Parliament, even though stylistically different, undoubtedly helped inspire American visitors. Some chose to stay, and among the American colony were Francis Millet, Edwin Austin Abbey, John Singer Sargent, James McNeill Whistler, and George H. Boughton.

Concurrent with the discovery of the Renaissance, Americans found another past: their own of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To most Americans, even the highly educated, American history had meant ancestor worship, a few heroes (George Washington mainly), and the explorers. Other aspects of the past were a blank. Beginning in the 1870s, however, Americans discovered their past. This discovery can be traced to several causes: the burgeoning nationalism, the genteel concern that a lack of history meant decadence, and finally the year 1876. At the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia, Americans saw not only curiosities such as Washington’s false teeth, but eighteenth-century portraits, a survey of American painting, an “Old New England Kitchen” (a log cabin), antique spinning wheels, and Queen Anne chairs. Other aspects of the inquiry into the American past took the form of articles in Harper’s and Scribner’s on life, battles, and towns in the eighteenth century; serious scholarship such as Moses Coit Tyler’s books on early American literature; S.W.G. Benjamin’s on early portraitists; and The Magazine of American History (1877–1893). 7

Artists and architects also participated in this rite of self-discovery: they created in wood, paint, stone, and bronze images by which Americans could identify themselves. One of the first and certainly the best known of the patriotic symbols was Daniel Chester French’s Minute Man, unveiled in 1875 (Fig. 25). The work was based at least in part upon the antique statue Apollo

7 Aspects of this discovery of the American past are treated in Richard Guy Wilson, “Charles F. McKim and the Renaissance in America,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1972), chap. 4; and Vincent Scully, Jr., The Shingle Style (New Haven, 1955), chap. 2.
Belvedere, and French invested his work with emblems of peace and war; the plow and the gun. Simultaneously, Charles F. McKim commissioned the first photographic record of Colonial architecture and produced the first example of the Colonial Revival in the remodeling of the Robinson house in Newport, Rhode Island. The value of studying the Colonial past was noted by many architects, such as Robert S. Peabody, who in 1877 rather rhetorically asked: "With our Centennial year have we not discovered that we have a past worthy of study?" Painters responded to the increased historical sensibility with iconic visions. Monumentality exists with accuracy of detail in paintings such as George Boughton's Puritans Going to Church (1867; Fig. 26) and Thomas Eakins's William Rush Carving the Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River (1877). Another vital expression came through the illustrators for the popular periodicals, such as Edwin Austin Abbey and Howard Pyle, who would soon emerge as leading history painters.

The monumentalization and memorialization of the American Colonial and Revolutionary past increased in force in the succeeding decades; and in the 1880s the Civil War, too, entered the realm of history. Time had softened many of the brutal memories and had begun to claim many of the survivors.

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of the carnage. The conflict was viewed in a new light, as the acting out of archetypal themes of brother versus brother, of ritualistic initiations under fire, of badges of courage and manhood. For the United States, it secured admission into a pantheon of nations possessing a stock of noble themes. Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s Admiral Farragut Memorial in Madison Square Park, New York City (1877-1881; Fig. 27), set the stage with a simplified naturalism learned from fifteenth-century Florentine sculpture. Caught in a moment of action on the bridge of his ship with the wind tugging at his coat, Farragut transcends the place and action with his expression and carriage to become a symbol of stoic heroism and commitment. The pedestal designed by Stanford White and the carvings by Saint-Gaudens explicitly refer to the Renaissance in the calligraphy, the emblems, and the twin semireclining figures personifying Courage and Loyalty.

As the War Between the States passed into history, grand army plazas, soldiers’ and sailors’ monuments, memorials to regiments, tombs, and statues of leaders and heroes became omnipresent. Both leaders and foot soldiers were recognized, and in Saint-Gaudens’s monument to Colonel Robert Shaw in Boston, the black soldier’s contribution was memorialized.

FIG. 27
Admiral David Glasgow Farragut Memorial, Madison Square Park, New York City, 1877-1881.
PHOTO: Bob Zucker.
FIG. 28
Robert E. Lee Monument, Richmond, Virginia, 1890.
Jean A. Mercié (1845–1916).
Bronze.
PHOTO: Metropolitan Richmond Chamber of Commerce.
The South began to remember its version of the conflict. In 1890 an equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee (Fig. 28) by the French sculptor Jean A. Mercié (a fellow student and a friend of Saint-Gaudens's from the atelier Jouffroy) was unveiled in Richmond, Virginia, on a square that became the head of Monument Avenue, a grand boulevard punctuated with statues to other members of the Lost Cause.  

Seeking symbols for American civilization, artists and architects naturally fastened on the Renaissance and the classic past; a historical symbiosis existed. The origins of American Georgian and Early Republican architecture lay not just in England but in Rome and the Renaissance. Senator James McMillan noted that the Capitol and the Treasury Department's headquarters were "in the classical style of architecture" and should serve as a precedent for the twentieth century. "All great art borrows from the Past," McMillan claimed, and he explained: "In architecture, the work of the individual is confined mainly to adapting to the conditions of his particular problem forms that have already been perfected."  

Joy Wheeler Dow, an architect and writer, advanced a similar argument in his appropriately titled book, American Renaissance (1904): "We want to belong somewhere and to something, not to be entirely cut off by ourselves as stray atoms." To Dow, Renaissance architecture meant all styles, including local variations such as American Georgian, Greek Revival, and Federal, that could be traced back to the Old World. All countries had drawn on the same source. Dow said of Richard Morris Hunt's Biltmore: "We call Biltmore French Renaissance now; it will be American Renaissance later on."  

Many artists attempted to use the iconography of the classic past in their American works, since ideal art required a universal language. Will Low, the muralist, indicated the frustrations when he said: "I am almost as tired of the 'early settlers' as I am of 'Justice', 'Science', and 'Art': but there is a rich field in the myths and history which we have inherited in common with all the modern world." To Kenyon Cox, American history was too short and "unfitted" and "modern costume [too] formless and ugly" to be a part of ideal art. A similar resentment was expressed by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, working on the Farragut in Rome: "It gives me a curious mixture (to see all these glories of the 'Renaissance') of a wish to do something good and of the hopelessness of it—what artists they were—'They weren't anything else.' I've been pegging away at my Farragut, but it's a hard 'tug' with our infernal modern dress—I only have the cap, sword, belt and buttons—and the resource of trying to strike away from the stuff we have in America."  

Edwin Blashfield reconciled American subject matter with the ideal by proclaiming that the conflict was bogus, that all art "is at one and the same time realistic and idealistic." Symbolic figures, drawn realistically, "like nature," could be idealistic if "informed with a sense of beauty." They received their identity by emblems, and if the pickelhaube, or the spiked helmet, meant Germany and the Phrygian liberty cap represented France, then one could "Americanize a figure with the Union Shield." Blashfield went on to claim: "The Attributes and the Graces have not settled by the Seine or the Rhine; the Muse is just as willing to take up the Lyre at Concord or Cambridge as at Florence or by the Fountain of Vincula."  


14 Kenyon Cox, The Classic Point of View (New York, 1911), p. 70.  


Washington Laying Down His Command at the Feet of Columbia (1902; Fig. 29), a mural in the Baltimore Courthouse by Blashfield, is such an Americanization. Instead of painting a narrative picture of the event, Blashfield attempted to immortalize the meaning by placing Columbia as a central figure and surrounding her with personifications of the Virtues dressed in medieval and classic costumes carrying emblems of War, Peace, Abundance, and Glory. Washington dressed in a historical costume of buff and blue is equally removed from the present, and as Kenyon Cox claimed: "The larger implications of the story to be told are much more clearly expressed than they could be by a realistic representation of the scene that occurred at Annapolis in 1783." 17

Flawed and filled with clichés, the American Renaissance search for symbolism came close to achieving an identifiable form with the American Virgin motif. The woman as a repository for higher virtues had a long history in nineteenth-century American culture, and earlier she had taken the form of Columbia, Liberty, and/or America. 18 But in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the female form in art was revitalized and the image presented was one of a beautiful, glowing-with-health young woman. She was elegant and noble, a woman from whose mind and lips there would never issue a crude thought or word. Unaware of her own sexuality and never overtly sold in carnal terms, she undeniably possessed a sexual presence. The American Virgin can be found at all levels of American culture, from the Swift Packing Company’s "Premium Calendar" to the languishing, drifting girls of Thomas Dewing’s paintings (Fig. 30). In literature, the American girl was a major presence. Henry James created a great controversy with Daisy Miller (1879), in which a misunderstanding by the American Virgin abroad leads to her death. Numerous critics and authors felt it necessary to defend the honor of the American girl. 19 Many of James’s

17 Cox, Classic Point of View, p. 76.
19 One example is William Dean Howells, The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885; reprint ed., New York, 1931), p. 19, where a character mentions the need "to honor the name of American Woman, and to redeem it from the national reproach of Daisy Millerism."
FIG. 30
The Days, 1887.
Thomas Dewing (1851–1938).
Oil on canvas; 109.6 x 180.8 cm.
(43 5/16 x 72 in.).
COLLECTION: Wadsworth Atheneum,
Hartford, Connecticut.
FIG. 31 Right
Bacchante, 1894.
Frederick MacMonnies (1863–1937).
Marble; height 219.7 cm. (86 1/2 in.).
COLLECTION: The Brooklyn Museum,
New York, Ella C. Woodward Fund.

FIG. 32 Facing page
COLLECTION: Avery Library, Columbia University, New York City.
FIG. 33
A Daughter of the South, a drawing for Collier's Weekly (July 31, 1909).
Charles Dana Gibson (1867–1944).
Ink on paper, 76.2 x 63.3 cm.
(30 x 25 in.).
COLLECTION: The Library of Congress,
Washington, D.C.
later stories concern the naive American Virgin confronting Old World evil. Explorations of the nature of the American Beauty can be seen in the novels of Edith Wharton, in which the innocent Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth* (1905) is contrasted with the scheming materialist Undine Sprague of *The Custom of the Country* (1913). For Henry Adams, infatuated with the Virgin of the twelfth century, the female symbol could never exercise such power in the nineteenth. He noted ironically, “An American Virgin would never dare command; an American Venus would never dare exist.”

Yet command she did. Foreign critics noted the uniqueness of the woman theme in American art as different renditions were made by Frederick MacMonnies (Fig. 31), Abbott Thayer (Fig. 37), and George de Forest Brush. For the World’s Columbian Exposition, MacMonnies created the sixty-foot-long Columbian Fountain that contained in the prow a Feminine Fame, aft, an old man as Father Time, and amidships on a high throne, a seminude Columbia (Fig. 32). Power was supplied by eight scantly clad females representing the Arts and Sciences and assisted by outriders on seahorses, mermaids, putti, and dolphins. Will Low, in commenting on this representation of “our as yet experimental civilization,” caught the central theme: “It is the young girl who fills such a large part of our experiment who is really to the fore. It is Smith and Wellesley who row with the young girl enthroned.”

The quintessence of the American Virgin can be found in the magazine illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson (Fig. 33), Alonzo Kimball, and Howard Chandler Christy. Aloof, statuesque, and yet sensuous, they were “the perfecting of the highest type of womanhood,” as Christy wrote in his paean, *The American Girl* (1906). However, the sad reality of the American Virgin became painfully evident in the case of Evelyn Nesbit, a celebrated beauty, a model for the Gibson Girl. Posing in Japanese kimonos, Grecian gowns, and on bearskin rugs, she was a subject for the cameras of Gertrude Käsebier and Rudolf Eickemeyer (Fig. 34). And, of course, she was ultimately the nemesis of Stanford White.

FIG. 34  Above 
*In My Studio (Evelyn Nesbit)*, 1901.
Rudolf Eickemeyer, Jr. (1831–1895).
Photograph.

FIG. 35  Facing page
Accepted design for the new Rhode Island State Capitol, Providence, *circa* 1892. McKim, Mead and White, architects. Rendering by Hughson Hawley (1850–1936).
Watercolor on paper; 81.3 x 109.2 cm.
(32 x 43 in.).
COLLECTION: State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.
FIG. 36
Oil on canvas; 121.9 x 243.8 cm. (48 x 96 in.).
FIG. 37
Caribas, 1894–1895.
Abbott Thayer (1849–1921).
Oil on canvas; 213.9 x 139.7 cm.
(85 x 55 in.).
COLLECTION: Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston, Massachusetts. The Warren
Collection and contributions through
the Paint and Clay Club.