

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, Dec 20, 1890 to May 30, 1891)

Early Works of Hiram Powers

Mr. Editor:

Not long since I met you in the Art Museum club you invited my admiration to a statue by Hiram Powers. Having a good opinion of your taste, I turned back for a second view of one of the best works of Cincinnati's most renowned sculptor.

On the way home some thoughts occurred to me concerning the career of the artist who had a very humble beginning in this city of his boyhood, and after twenty years of industry, attained a great celebrity in his own country and abroad.

In 1826, Hiram Powers, a [lanky] lad of nineteen, gradually drifted into a profession best fitted for his talents, by various incipient beginnings, chief of which was his connection with the Western Museum. This was an institution founded in 1818 by W^m Steele, Dr. Drake and others, to fill the place in that day which the Natural History Society occupies at the present time.

But the interest of the little town soon tired of caring for its collection of curiosities, and in 1823 transferred the whole to an enterprising Frenchman, Joseph Dorfueille. The new proprietor found that to attract the public he must keep up a succession of novelties, as do the [] museums of these times. He engaged Powers who had a good mechanical as well as artistic talent, to produce a variety of wax works, which were so skillfully executed as to bring him quite a local reputation.

Being intimate with the family of Mrs. Trollope, then living in Cincinnati, that lady suggested to the [] sculptor to produce a scene from Dante's Inferno, and her self wrote the prospectus for the hand bill. The spectacle was a success and had so great a run that Dorfueille materially increased his fortune and Powers his fame. That was in 1829, and for about forty years "The Infernal Regions" was one of the principal attractions of the Western Museum. I visited the Museum in 1866 when its quarters were moved to the East side of Sycamore Street just above Third.

The collections of old Dr. Drake and the early scientific men of Cincinnati were still there, together with many other curiosities, some of which were of the horrible. There still remained a number of the wax works of Hiram Powers, which one could see were well executed, notwithstanding they were begrimed with dust, the [tinsel] tarnished and the clothing faded. The Infernal Regions was yet an attraction, although I am assured that this scene was curtailed of many features, the work was quite artistic.

It is not so many years since the Western Museum closed its doors forever.

Where its collections went to, I cannot tell. I suppose the figures in The Infernal Regions and other waxworks were broken up.

I should like to know what became of its organ. In 1826 Dr. Drake saw it was a very fine one, and as it droned its dolorous music for forty years, there must be many here who have heard it, as they passed by on Sycamore Street, who will be able to form an opinion of Dr. Drake's musical taste.

In this Western Museum Powers carved a very creditable statue of Minerva, which was set on a column on the south west corner of Main and Pearl Sts as a sign post for the Museum. It was blown down in a storm in 1868. The scattered fragments just after the mishap, were gazed at by an idle crowd, few of them knowing that they were a relic of Cincinnati's greatest sculptor, and few of them having probably ever heard his name.

The last of his early works made for public view, in my knowledge, disappeared two years ago. The Court House of Covington, like most rural Court Houses of a generation ago, and more especially those south of the Ohio River, was surmounted by a Cupola. On the pinnacle was a wooden statue of Washington by Powers. The gaze of the figure was directed by the gutter on Greenup Street, at which it aimed a revolver. It was supposed to represent the scroll of the Constitution, done up in a neat rule, but one could scarcely imagine it otherwise than a revolver about to be fired at the pigs which had their favorite wallow in the Greenup Street gutter.

Generations of them assisted Gen. Washington in the Allegheny prompting the City Counsel to pass the anti-hog law which for a long time agitated the citizens of Covington, but at last it was accomplished. The mission of the statue on the Cupola was ended. The Court House was remodeled and Covington having become a notable city, the rural Cupola with was taken down, and with it, Powers' Washington. The statue was found to be somewhat decayed and was about to be thrown into a woodpile, when rescued by Mr. Howell, a public spirited citizen. Receiving permission to care for it, he set it up in the Grass plot in the Court House Yard and painted the figures in several glaring colors. Mr. Howell's zeal for the memory of Powers was greater than his skill as an artist and for several years the gaudy statue excited the merriment of passing strangers. As a work of art it was rather crude but did not look badly when in the elevated position for which it was made. It was interesting principally as an example of the early efforts of the artist who sculptured the beautiful statue in the Art Museum.

G. B. Nicholson

Hy Hopper's Informal
Dec 27 1890