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Jones: Some Reflections on 19th Century Art in Huntsville
SOME REFLECTIONS ON ART IN 19TH CENTURY HUNTSVILLE

by
John Rison Jones, Jr.

The recent sale of two Huntsville-related works of art at New Orleans auction houses brings to mind little-known aspects of the cultural life of Huntsville in the pre-Civil War period, especially the Meredith Calhoun collection which was believed to be one of the "largest and most valuable art collections in the south," (1) The art world of Huntsville in the nineteenth century has never been properly researched, nor has much been written about the artists who plied their trade in the city. Much work needs to be undertaken to catalog the remaining treasures of this fascinating period. (2)

What of the works that were auctioned? The first was a large historical painting by William Frye, the noted portrait painter. (3) "The Legend of Florinda" was painted here in 1862 and signed in the usual Frye manner on the back of the canvas. The painting was purchased by General Waddy Thompson of South Carolina and sold by his descendants. General Thompson earned his military status during the Cherokee Wars, served in the United States Congress, and was perhaps distantly related to the Governor Thomas Bibb family. (4) "Florinda" is a major departure from the kind of art associated with Frye. It is a copy of the well-known work by Franz Xavier Winterhalter, the noted artist at the courts of Queen Victoria of England and Napoleon III of France. Evidently Winterhalter painted several versions of the work, since one is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and we know that Queen Victoria purchased a copy to present to Prince Albert on his birthday, May 21, 1851. This version hung in the Queen's Sitting Room at the small palace at Osborne. (5) The Frye painting, estimated to bring between \$6,000 and \$8,000 sold for a record \$23,000 which is a major sum for an otherwise obscure artist associated with Alabama.

The second work was a huge portrait--some 9 feet 5 inches by 7 feet 2 inches--of Ann Eliza Harris James who died in Huntsville in 1908 at age 90, attributed to the noted artist, George Cooke, who worked with Charles Byrd King on Indian portraits for Thomas McKenney in Washington in the 1820s.. Cooke eventually came south to Georgia where he befriended the architect Daniel Pratt before moving on to New Orleans. (6) One can wonder how George Cooke painted a Huntsville portrait. It is possible that the commission resulted from a possible friendship between Daniel Pratt and Huntsville's George Steele Mrs. Steele, Eliza Weaver, had a sister, Judith, who married Henry Macon Harris, the first cousin of Mrs. James's father, William Harris. (7)

During a moment of reflection about the James portrait and its loss to Huntsville, one can visualize how difficult it must have been to crate this substantial painting for its journey to Eason cousins who lived in Desoto County, Mississippi, after Mrs. James's death. She lived in a large house on North Greene Street near the site of the present Todd Towers. (8) The sheer

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size of the painting must have unnerved the movers! That sudden image brings
to mind a similar incident in Huntsville history recorded in 1910: (9)

"Some weeks ago several heavily loaded drays were seen wending their way slowly toward the Huntsville depot. The casual passerby glanced with a nervous curiosity at the huge boxes, but little dreamed what a regrettable page in Huntsville's history was being formed, for much of the glory of by-gone days passes out with the sale of the valuable Calhoun collection of paintings and sculpture and instantly changed is the social life in Huntsville.... While journeymen are pulling down the last remaining walls of the Calhoun house, and on the gate of Abingdon Place, the handsome suburban residence of the lamented Colonel Milton Humes, hangs a placard "For Sale," these two residences for nearly three-quarters of a century have held these beautiful things..."

Elsewhere in this publication Nancy Rohr discusses Judge William Smith and some of his descendants, including Meredith Calhoun and his wife, Mary Smith Taylor Calhoun. The purpose of this essay is to explore what is known about their extensive art collection. They were great patrons of the arts and spent a considerable period of their lives in foreign travel and residence. And travel in style they did! The newspapers reported that their traveling coach was one of the most luxurious for the time "before Pullmans were in use." For more than 25 years, except for occasional visits to attend to their affairs and large interests in Alabama and Louisiana, the Calhouns lived abroad. Art purchases were shipped to the great mansion on Eustis Avenue built for Judge Smith by Thomas and William Brandon. The informative article on the Calhoun house by Linda Bayer [Allen] is a "must read" for Huntsville cultural life. (10)

But what of the collection? It is known that it was sold by Ada Calhoun Lane, Meredith Calhoun's daughter, to Milton and Ellelee Chapman Humes in 1887 for \$25,000, and subsequently removed from Eustis Avenue to the Humes residence on Meridian Street, Abingdon Place. Mrs. Humes sold the collection to Eli P. Clark of Los Angeles on November 11, 1910, for \$60,000, and the collection left Huntsville for Chicago, prior to its ultimate destination in California.

The collection consisted primarily of copies of great masterpieces by such European masters as Titian, Raphael, Carravagio, and Remi. It is the size of the collection that is impressive: 23 oils and 8 sculptures. Note in the accompanying list of the collection (as it is now known) the size of individual paintings.

Two works have an interesting history--those of Guiseppe Sabatelli. While his work is virtually unknown today, in the 1830s the purchase by Meredith Calhoun of these two oils caused an uproar in Florence at the court of the Grand Duke Leopold II of Tuscany. He attempted to prevent the export of these works from Florence, but the sale had been completed. Nevertheless, Leopold

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banned any future export of Sabatelli's works. Guiseppe Sabatelli, the son of
artist Luigi Sabatelli, was the head of the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence.
(11)

The other works, with the exception of Joost-Cornelisz Droogsloot's "Pool of Bethesda" (signed and dated 1633) were copies. Certainly oil copies of major works of art were common. There were few reproductive mechanisms except etchings. Lithography had only been introduced into the United States in 1818 and color lithography did not reach maturity until the late nineteenth century. Travelers or collectors in Europe had no recourse but to purchase etchings as reproductions or oil copies. Consequently, southern houses were filled in the nineteenth century with small copies of noted works, usually brought back to this country after a "Grand Tour."

The Calhoun copies, however, were pronounced by a Chicago art critic sent to examine the collection for Mr. Clark as "the best he had ever seen," saying "they must all have been done by masters.... gems which no money could buy at the present time." (12)

The most noted portion of the collection must be the sculptures, especially the two works by American sculptor, Thomas Crawford, best known for his works in the United States Capitol. Like so many other American artists in the nineteenth century, Crawford lived primarily in Rome where the Calhouns purchased "Paris Throwing the Apple" (1837) and the bust of George Washington. Crawford's best known work is "Freedom" which adorns the dome of the Capitol in Washington, DC. He executed the great east portico frieze, "The Progress of Civilization," for the Senate side of the building. He also created the massive bronze doors for that side of the building. These doors depict major events in the life of Washington, and the House doors relate to various episodes in American history. (13)

The Lorenzo Bartolini "Prayer" may have been a strategic purchase for the Calhouns, inasmuch as they spent much time at the court of Napoleon III. Bartolini is best known for the numerous busts of members of the Bonaparte family--Jerome, Marie Anne, Joseph, the Empress Josephine, and Napoleon I.

Although the Calhoun collection has passed into history, it is interesting to add that not all items from the collection left the family. Descendants now living in British Columbia have several items of note: miniatures of William Smith and his wife; marble busts assumed to be Meredith Calhoun and his wife; a reproduction of the handsome portrait by Franz Xavier Winterhalter of Marie Marguerite Ada Calhoun who married George Washington Lane of New Orleans. (See photograph on page 3.) Family tradition has it that Ada's neck was so beautiful that Winterhalter used it as a model for the Empress Eugenie. And there is a wonderful daguerreotype of Meredith Calhoun looking very French. He has a Napoleonic goatee, is dressed in the latest fashion, and is depicted in a typical paneled French salon. (14)

Although it is not clear even today how extensive the Calhoun collection was, the items sold in 1887 and again in 1910 are recorded as an addendum to this article.

As more research is done into little known aspects of Huntsville's cultural history, further evidence of the unique character of the early city becomes clearer. It is possible to call the Calhoun collection the first Museum of Art in Huntsville. It is known that the public could view the collection at specific times. One can imagine the delight of the young student artists at the Huntsville Female Seminary and the Huntsville Female College upon viewing European masterpieces with their teachers.

To return to William Frye and "The Legend of Florinda," is it possible that Meredith Calhoun may have brought to Huntsville a copy of the Winterhalter--an etching, or perhaps an *Illustrated London News*--that Frye had access to? It is known that Frye copied an engraving of the Battle of Mobile Bay which appeared in *Harper's Weekly*. This work is now in the Museum of the South in Mobile. Somehow it is more romantic to forge a Calhoun-Frye linkage with "Florinda."

ENDNOTES

- (1) "Art Treasures Sent from This City to Chicago." Unidentified clipping from a Huntsville newspaper, Heritage Room, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.
- (2) The Birmingham Museum of Art is organizing a significant exhibition entitled "Made in Alabama" which will be on view at the Huntsville Museum of Art in early 1995. Bryding Adams, Curator of American Art, has organized this important look at Alabama's decorative arts history. Research was undertaken in northern Alabama by Catherine Estes of the Museum.
- (3) Adams, Bryding. "William Frye, Artist." *Alabama Heritage*, Spring, 1994, Volume 32, pp. 30-38.
- (4) *Biographical Directory of the American Congress*, Government Printing Office, 1971, p. 1812. See Saunders, Col. James Edmonds. *Early Settlers of Alabama*, Genealogical Publishing Company, 1969 (Reprint), pp. 469 ff.
- (5) Millar, Oliver. *The Queen's Pictures. The History of the British Royal Collection*. MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, 1977, p. 172.
- (6) Banks, William Nathaniel. "George Cooke. Painter of the American Scene." *The Magazine Antiques* (September 1972), Vol. CII, no. 3,

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pp. 448-454. Keyes, Donald D. *George Cooke, 1793-1849*. Athens,
University of Georgia Press.

- (7) Research undertaken by the author for the Huntsville Museum of Art Acquisitions Committee, June, 1994.
- (8) *Huntsville City Directory, 1895*. Microfilm of the Sanborn Fire Maps for Huntsville, Huntsville-Madison County Public Library.
- (9) See Note (1).
- (10) Bayer, Linda. "The Calhoun House." *Historic Huntsville Quarterly*, Spring-Summer, 1983, pp. 29-36.
- (11) Benezit. *Dictionnaire Des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Gravues*.
- (12) See Note (1).
- (13) *Art in the United States Capitol*, Government Printing Office, 1976, pp. 346-349; 383.
- (14) Personal correspondence with Calhoun descendants now living in British Columbia.

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THE MEREDITH CALHOUN ART COLLECTION

TITLE	SIZE	MEDIUM	SURFACE	PAINTER	DESCRIPTION
Mother of the Gracchi	60 X 78	Oil	Canvas	Giuseppe Sabatelli	1837; Original work
Tasso Reading His Poems	60 X 78	Oil	Canvas	Giuseppe Sabatelli	1837; Original
Pool of Bethesda	20 X 25	Oil	Wood	J-C Droogslout	1633; Signature
Coliseum at Rome	48 X 60	Oil	Canvas	Unknown	
Ruins in Greece	45 X 60	Oil	Canvas	Unknown	
Sunset	20 X 25	Oil	Canvas	Unknown	
Travelers	20 X 25	Oil	Canvas	Unknown	
Storm at Sea	25 X 40	Oil	Canvas	Unknown	
Persian Sybil	28 X 50	Oil	Unknown		After Giochino
Holy Family	48 X 61	Oil	Or. Wood		Copy after Raphael known as De La Impanato
Madonna and Child	41 X 36	Oil	Canvas		Copy after Murillo
Madonna and Child	28 X 28	Oil	Canvas		Copy after Raphael, known as De la Sedia
Coronation of the Virgin	36 X 50	Oil	Unknown		After Raphael
Holy Family	20 X 25	Oil	Canvas		"Fine Florentine Frame"
Fruit Girl	30 X 38	Oil	Unknown		After Titian
Lavinia	30 X 37	Oil	Canvas		After Titian
Fortune tellers	38 X 53	Oil	Canvas		After Caravaggio
Gamblers	38 X 53	Oil	Canvas		After Caravaggio
Crucifixion of Saint Andrew	39 X 42	Oil	Wood (Walnut)		After Carlo Dolci
Aurora	40 X 77	Oil	Canvas		After Guido Remi
Michael and the Dragon	30 X 57	Oil	Canvas		After Guido Remi
Mary Magdalene with Alabaster Box	24 X 30	Oil	Canvas		After Carlo Dolci
Holy Family	31 X 25	Oil	Wood		After Raphael

TITLE	SCULPTOR	DESCRIPTION
Prayer	Bartolini	Original including marble pedestal
Paris Throwing the Apple	Thomas Crawford	Marked T. Crawford; Rome 1837 including pedestal
Marble Head of Washington	Thomas Crawford	Including mahogany pedestal
Marble bust: head of Ceres	Copy (?)	Original by Todolini, including mahogany pedestal
Venus of the Bath	Pompalino	After Canova, including marble pedestal
Venus of the Rock	Pompalino	After Canova, including marble pedestal
Pluto and Ceres	G. Trouillard	Bronze (May have been Humes purchase)
Neptune	G. Trouillard	Bronze (May have been Humes purchase)

A large Florentine Mosaic table set in solid brass with solid brass pedestal and base.