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# “My Dear God-Like Sculptor...”

## RLS and Saint-Gaudens

- Marianne McLeod Gilchrist -

The portrait-relief of Robert Louis Stevenson in Saint Giles Church in Edinburgh is a graceful memorial to a much-loved writer. It is also Scotland's only example of the work of the great American sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907). Westminster has a reduction of his standing statue of Lincoln from Chicago; Dublin has the Parnell Monument, to a large extent the work of his studio when Saint-Gaudens himself was dying. But, in the Stevenson Memorial, Edinburgh has a work which held greater personal significance for the sculptor: it commemorates a friend.

The portrait, in low relief, is familiar through reproduction. Stevenson lies, propped by pillows, on a scroll-backed couch - but the trappings of invalidism are belied by his alert expression. A pen is poised in his thin fingers. The work conveys so much of Stevenson's traditional image: the dedicated writer persevering in spite of chronic tuberculosis; the free spirit in the fragile body - images appropriate to a monument to a dead man. In fact, the portrait was modelled when he was very much alive. It was begun in New York in the autumn of 1887, soon after Stevenson and Saint-Gaudens met.

Augustus Saint-Gaudens' name is no longer familiar, although his public monuments and intimate portraits in low relief received international acclaim in his time. He was born in Dublin in 1848, the son of a French shoemaker and his Irish wife. When he was still a baby, the family emigrated to the United States. 'Gus', as he was known, grew up in New York, where he was apprenticed to a cameo-cutter and attended part-time art classes. Later, he travelled to Paris and Rome for more formal training.

His first major public commission was the statue of Admiral David Glasgow Farragut in Madison Square, New York. The bronze sculpture, on a carved bluestone base (now replaced with black granite) which prefigures the Art Nouveau, was unveiled to critical acclaim in 1881. By 1887, when the standing figure of Lincoln was erected in Lincoln Park, Chicago, 39-year-old Gus Saint-Gaudens had established himself as one of America's leading sculptors. Already he was working on his finest piece: the memorial to the gentle, valiant young Colonel Robert Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Colored Volunteer Infantry - the first regiment of Northern blacks in the Civil War - which stands on Boston's Beacon Street, and has

been celebrated in poetry, music and film.<sup>1</sup>

Saint-Gaudens was a hard-working professional artist, a robust and humorous man with aquiline features and a red beard. He was, by his own admission, “very little of a reader”. But in the mid-1880s, Joseph M. Wells, a draughtsman friend of Saint-Gaudens, showed him a volume of short stories called *New Arabian Nights*. The impact on the sculptor was tremendous: as he later recalled, “my introduction to these stories set me aflame as have few things in literature.”

When Saint-Gaudens discovered that another friend, the artist Will Low, already knew the author of the marvellous stories, “I told him that if Stevenson ever crossed to this side of the water, I should consider it an honor if he would allow me to make his portrait”.<sup>2</sup> The honour was his within weeks.

In September 1887, Robert Louis Stevenson arrived in New York City on his way to the Adirondacks. He had been taken ill at Newport, and while recuperating at the Hotel Albert on 11th Street, Will Low introduced him to Saint-Gaudens. The two men struck up an instant friendship. The sculptor found Stevenson, who was two years his junior, “Astonishingly young, not a bit of an invalid, and a bully fellow”.<sup>3</sup> (By contrast, in 1890 Henry Adams described the gaunt, lanky Stevenson as “an insane stork”).<sup>4</sup> Stevenson, for his part, considered Saint-Gaudens “a splendid straight-forward and simple fellow”,<sup>5</sup> “remarkable looking, and like an Italian cinquecento medallion”.<sup>6</sup> He agreed to sit for a portrait.

Saint-Gaudens, usually accompanied by Low, would arrive at the hotel in the morning. Stevenson would be sitting up in bed, reading or being read to by his American wife, Fanny. Saint-Gaudens modelled a low-relief medallion of Stevenson’s head in clay, from which he could make casts in plaster and, finally, bronze. The work took five sessions of two to three hours each. Their conversations were lively. Prompted by Low’s allusion to Emerson’s poem *Painting and Sculpture*:

The sinful painter drapes his goddess warm,  
Because she still is naked, being drest;  
The godlike sculptor will not so deform  
Beauty, which bones and flesh enough invest,

Stevenson nicknamed Saint-Gaudens “the god-like sculptor”.

Stevenson gave Saint-Gaudens a complete set of his works, with inscriptions:

Each of us must have our way,  
Mine with ink and yours with clay,<sup>7</sup>

and, in *Virginibus Puerisque*, “Read the essay on Burns. I think it is a good thing”.<sup>8</sup> Stevenson’s aphorisms

appealed to the sculptor: “The man who has not seen the dawn every day of his life has not lived,” he said. “The man who has not taken his life in his hands at some time or other has not lived.”<sup>9</sup>

The energetic Saint-Gaudens began to understand the frustrations which Stevenson’s precarious health imposed upon his quicksilver intellect: “I realised his reverence for men of action, men of affairs, soldiers, and administrators”. Stevenson regretted lacking the physical strength with which to defend himself if necessary. He told Saint-Gaudens that “perhaps the most trying episode in his life was one in which he had a conversation with a man which, had it taken a certain direction, would have left no alternative but one of personal altercation in which he himself could present but a pitiable figure.”<sup>10</sup>

After Saint-Gaudens had finished the clay medallion, Stevenson continued his journey. In October he arrived at Saranac Lake in the Adirondacks. However, his relationship with the lung-specialist at Saranac, Dr. Edward Trudeau, was not always easy, since Trudeau disapproved of his patient’s heavy smoking. Nevertheless, his health improved. Through the winter, Stevenson wrote numerous essays for *Scribner’s Magazine*, collaborated with his stepson Lloyd Osbourne on *The Wrong Box*, and, in December, began *The Master of Ballantrae*.

Meanwhile, Saint-Gaudens was wishing that he had extended the relief medallion to include Stevenson’s long, slender hands. In his subject’s absence, he began to model the hands upon those of his wife, Augusta, but the results were unsatisfactory. To his relief, Stevenson returned to New York in the spring.

In March, Fanny Stevenson had left for San Francisco to visit her daughter and arrange transport for their journey into the Pacific. Soon after her departure, Stevenson had become embroiled in a bitter postal feud with his old friend William E. Henley, who had accused Fanny of plagiarism. New York offered distracting company and newer friends. Stevenson, his mother Maggie, Lloyd Osbourne and their maid stayed at the Hotel St. Stephen. He met Samuel L. Clemens, ‘Mark Twain’, and - importantly - renewed his acquaintance with Gus Saint-Gaudens.

Saint-Gaudens had not forgotten Stevenson’s interest in “men of action”. One of them was sitting for him for a bust: the retired Civil War general and Indian-fighter William Tecumseh Sherman. Saint-Gaudens promised Stevenson that he would ask the elderly General if he would like to meet him. Sherman, accustomed to visits from his old soldiers, inquired gruffly, “Who is Robert Louis Stevenson? Is he one of

my boys?”<sup>11</sup>

Saint-Gaudens mentioned *New Arabian Nights*, but Sherman was not familiar with Stevenson's writing. Fortunately, Saint-Gaudens remembered that the General was a keen theatre-goer. Soon after Stevenson's arrival in New York in September, Russell Sullivan's dramatisation of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* had caused a sensation. Because of Stevenson's illness, Will Low had escorted Maggie and Fanny Stevenson to the theatre for the opening night, and had been mistaken for the author. Surely Sherman knew the play?

He did. "The man who wrote that is no fool," he said, and agreed to a meeting. The arrangements were made the following day by Maggie Stevenson, while the General was sitting for his bust. Sherman had forgotten his conversation with Saint-Gaudens, and had to be reminded that Stevenson was not one of "his boys" but the creator of *Dr. Jekyll*. Sherman then struck up a highly animated conversation with Maggie Stevenson, demonstrating "the much greater danger of an insignificant looking wound of a musket ball than that of the ugly slash of a saber cut... by a sweep of his hand in the air, and... by a thrust of his forefinger in Mrs. Stevenson's side".<sup>12</sup>

It was arranged for Stevenson to call on Sherman at his apartment in the Fifth Avenue Hotel. Again, Sherman asked if Stevenson was one of "his boys", but this time he lost interest on being told that he was not. However, Stevenson saved the day by asking the old General about his campaigns. Very soon, as Saint-Gaudens remembered, "they were both busily engaged fighting his battles over, with a map stretched out on the round table in the center of the room". Clearly, the whisky was flowing, for the sculptor added wryly: "There my recollection ceases and I can only remember driving back in the cab with Mr. Stevenson through the mist, a real Scotch one."<sup>13</sup>

In May, the Stevensons moved to Union House, a country inn at Manasquan, New Jersey. Saint-Gaudens continued to visit from New York. He decided to sketch and make casts of Stevenson's hands, so that he could extend the medallion as he wished. Since 27 May was a fine, sunny day, he brought with him his 8-year-old son Homer. Homer was a mischievous, dark-haired child, much indulged by his mother. (Two years later, John Singer Sargent was to find that the only way to stop the boy head-butting him while he was trying to paint his portrait was to sit on him.) Saint-Gaudens tried to tell Homer that "he was about to meet a man whom he must remember all his life". He introduced his son to Stevenson "with mock formality, as one does with a child". Homer, unimpressed, grew restless, so his father sent him to play

outside.

As before, Stevenson lay on the couch, his knees drawn up. Sometimes he smoked, sometimes he wrote. Even after Saint-Gaudens had finished sketching, he continued to write, smiling to himself. He placed the piece of paper in an envelope, which he addressed to “Master Homer Saint-Gaudens”.

“Do you wish me to give this to the boy?” asked his father.

“Yes,” Stevenson replied.

“When? Now?”

Stevenson shook his head: “Oh no, in five or ten years, or when I am dead.”<sup>14</sup>

The letter, which displays Stevenson’s affection for and understanding of children, runs as follows:

Dear Homer St. Gaudens, - Your father has brought you this day to see me, and he tells me it is his hope you may remember this occasion. I am going to do what I can to carry out his wish; and it may amuse you, years after, to see this little scrap of paper and to read what I write. I must begin by testifying that you yourself took no interest whatever in the introduction, and in the most proper spirit displayed a single-minded ambition to get back to play, and this I thought an excellent and admirable point in your character. You were also (I use the past tense, with a view to the time when you shall read, rather than to that when I am writing) a very pretty boy, and (to my European view) startlingly self-possessed. My time of observation was so limited that you must pardon me if I can say no more: what else I marked, what restlessness of hand and foot, what graceful clumsiness, what experimental designs upon the furniture, was but the common inheritance of human youth. But you may perhaps like to know that the lean flushed man in bed, who interested you so little, was in a state of mind extremely mingled and unpleasant: harrassed with work which he thought he was not doing well, troubled with difficulties to which you will in time succeed, and yet looking forward to no less a matter than a voyage to the South Seas and the visitation of savage and desert islands. - Your father’s friend, Robert Louis Stevenson.<sup>15</sup>

Soon afterwards, Fanny Stevenson telegraphed him from California: she had secured a schooner yacht, the *Casco*, for the voyage. The rest of the family began the long rail journey across America before setting sail. The travels in the South Seas were to lead at last to Samoa, and the home where Stevenson was to spend the remainder of his short life - Vailima.

Saint-Gaudens, meanwhile, continued working on his relief-portrait of Stevenson. In the first version, a rectangular bronze panel, Stevenson is depicted lying in bed; his left hand holds his papers, and his right, raised, a cigarette. The background is occupied with the poem which Stevenson had dedicated to

Will Low and had been published in the volume *Underwoods* in 1887:

Youth now flees on feathered foot,  
Faint and fainter sounds the flute,  
Rarer songs of gods; and still  
Somewhere on the sunny hill,  
Or along the winding stream,  
Through the willows, flits a dream...

Between the first and second stanzas, Saint-Gaudens depicted the prancing form of a winged horse, the embodiment of the fleeting ideal beauty described in the poem. A second circular version was also designed, curtailing Stevenson's figure below the knees, and with the three stanzas of the poem arranged vertically. Casts, full-sized and reduced, were made from both designs, some with minor variations, chiefly in the decorative borders. Stevenson wrote to him from Vailima, Samoa, on 29 May 1893, beginning, "My dear god-like sculptor", with requests:

...for a couple of copies of my medallion, as gilt-edged and high-toned as it is possible to make them. One is for our house here... The other is for my friend Sidney Colvin, and should be addressed - Sidney Colvin, Esq., Keeper of the Print Room, British Museum, London.<sup>16</sup>

Colvin's circular relief is unlocated, but Stevenson's is probably the copy now in the Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., sold by Belle Strong (his stepdaughter) in 1915.<sup>17</sup>

Stevenson also had another less conventional suggestion for his friend:

Our house is lined with varnished wood of a dark ruddy colour... ; at the same time, it calls very much for gold; there is a limit to picture frames, and really you know there has to be a limit to the pictures you put inside of them. Accordingly, we have had an idea of a certain kind of decoration, which, I think, you might help us to make practical. What we want is an alphabet of gilt letters (very much such as people play with), and all mounted on spikes like drawing pins... You see, suppose you entertain an honoured guest, when he goes he leaves his name in gilt letters on your walls; an infinity of fun and decoration can be got out of hospitable and festive mottoes; and the doors of every room can be beautified by the legend of their name.<sup>18</sup>

Stevenson hoped that he might be able to obtain two or three hundred letters in metal or composition gilt for a reasonable price. He required a number of apostrophes "to write the Samoan language, which is full of words written thus: la'u, ti'e ti'e".<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, the cost of the gilt bronze letters proved prohibitive, as Stevenson explained regretfully in a letter of September 1893:

The Battle of the Golden Letters will never be delivered. On making preparation to open the campaign, the King found himself face to face with invincible difficulties, in which the rapacity of a mercenary soldiery and the complaints of an impoverished treasury played an equal part.<sup>20</sup>

The medallion had arrived, but remained in the warehouse of a German company due to transport problems:

...to put it on the horse's back we have not the heart. Beneath the beauty of R.L.S., to say nothing of his verses, which the publishers find heavy enough, and the genius of the god-like sculptor, the spine would snap and the well-knit limbs of the (ahem) cart-horse would be loosed by death.<sup>21</sup>

It was finally delivered in July 1894; as Stevenson wrote on 8 July:

My dear Saint Gaudens, - This is to tell you that the medallion has been at last triumphantly transported up the hill and placed over my smoking-room mantelpiece. It is considered by everybody a first-rate but flattering portrait. We have it in a very good light, which brings out the artistic merits of the god-like sculptor to great advantage. As for my own opinion, I believe it to be a speaking likeness, and not flattered at all; possibly a little the reverse. The verses (curse the rhyme) look remarkably well.<sup>22</sup>

On 3 December, Stevenson died suddenly from a stroke, aged 44.

Saint-Gaudens had valued his friendship dearly. As he had written to Will Low:

My episode with Stevenson has been one of the events of my life... It makes me very happy, and as the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right... *vide* constitution of the United States, I'm damned if I don't think I've a right to be so...<sup>23</sup>

After Stevenson's death, he seized the opportunity offered by a committee headed by Lord Rosebery and Sidney Colvin to provide his friend with a permanent memorial in St. Giles.

The St. Giles relief was based upon the first, rectangular version of the portrait. However, some alterations were deemed fitting: the bed and blanket were replaced by an ornate couch and a fringed travelling rug; the cigarette became a pen. In place of "Youth now flees on feathered foot", the background inscription was the prayer beginning "Give us grace and strength to forbear and persevere..." Along the top and down the sides lies a garland of laurel, with heather and hibiscus to represent Scotland and Samoa.

Saint-Gaudens completed the plaster model in Paris in 1900, but was dissatisfied with the bronze cast. At the same time, his health was failing: he returned to America for surgery for bowel cancer. He finished the relief at his country home in Cornish, New Hampshire, with the assistance of his brother Louis

and assistants Henry Hering and Frances Grimes. The complete bronze, surrounded by rouge royale marble, measures 231 x 277 cms. It was unveiled in St Giles Church in June 1904.

On the plinth, below Stevenson's name and dates, are inscribed the words of *Requiem*:

Under the wide and starry sky,  
Dig the grave and let me lie.  
Glad did I live and gladly die,  
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:  
*Here he lies where he longed to be;*  
*Home is the sailor, home from sea,*  
*And the hunter home from the hill.*

Gus Saint-Gaudens finally succumbed to his cancer in August 1907. His old friend the architect Charles McKim was in Edinburgh when he heard the news. He went into St. Giles and gazed awhile at the Stevenson Memorial: "...it was a comfort to me to be able to visit the church and to see his great work constantly surrounded by the public, who did not even know the name of the sculptor".<sup>24</sup>

"Who did not even know the name of the sculptor"... What was true in 1907 is truer still today: Saint-Gaudens is now little-known outside the realm of specialists in nineteenth-century American art. Yet in this centenary of RLS, perhaps we should also honour the memory of his friend, who gave us a monument worthy of its subject.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>William Vaughn Moody, *Ode in a Time of Hesitation*; Robert Lowell, *For the Union Dead*; Charles Ives, *Three Places in New England*; the 1989 film, *Glory*.

<sup>2</sup>Homer Saint-Gaudens, ed., *Reminiscences of Augustus Saint-Gaudens*, New York, 1913, vol. I, p. 373.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted by Will H. Low, *A Chronicle of Friendships*, New York, 1908, p. 389.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted by Ian Bell, *Dreams of Exile: RLS*, Edinburgh, 1992.

<sup>5</sup>Low, *A Chronicle of Friendships*, p. 389.

<sup>6</sup>Sidney Colvin, ed., *The Letters of R. L. Stevenson, Works of RLS*, Swanston ed., 1912, vol. XXIV, p. 239.

<sup>7</sup>Louise Hall Tharp, *Saint-Gaudens and the Gilded Era*, Boston, 1969, p. 213.

<sup>8</sup>Saint-Gaudens, *Reminiscences*, vol. I, p. 374.

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 375.

<sup>11</sup>Saint-Gaudens, *Reminiscences*, vol. I, p. 381.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 382-3.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 375-6.

<sup>15</sup>RLS, *Letters*, vol. XXIV, pp. 287-8.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. XXV, p. 308.

<sup>17</sup>John Dryfhout, *The Work of Augustus Saint-Gaudens*, Hanover, NH, & London, p. 175.

<sup>18</sup>RLS, *Letters*, vol. XXV, pp. 308-9.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 309.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 342.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 341.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 410.

<sup>23</sup>Low, *A Chronicle of Friendships*, p. 395.

<sup>24</sup>Quoted by Burke Wilkinson, *The Life and Works of Augustus Saint-Gaudens*, New York & Gerrards Cross, corrected ed., 1992, p. 370.

I must also thank Judith Nyhus of the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, Cornish, New Hampshire. Saint-Gaudens' country home is now a museum devoted to his work, and is open to the public.

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