

ART AND ARTISTS IN CONNECTICUT

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Art and artists in Connecticut by H. W. French

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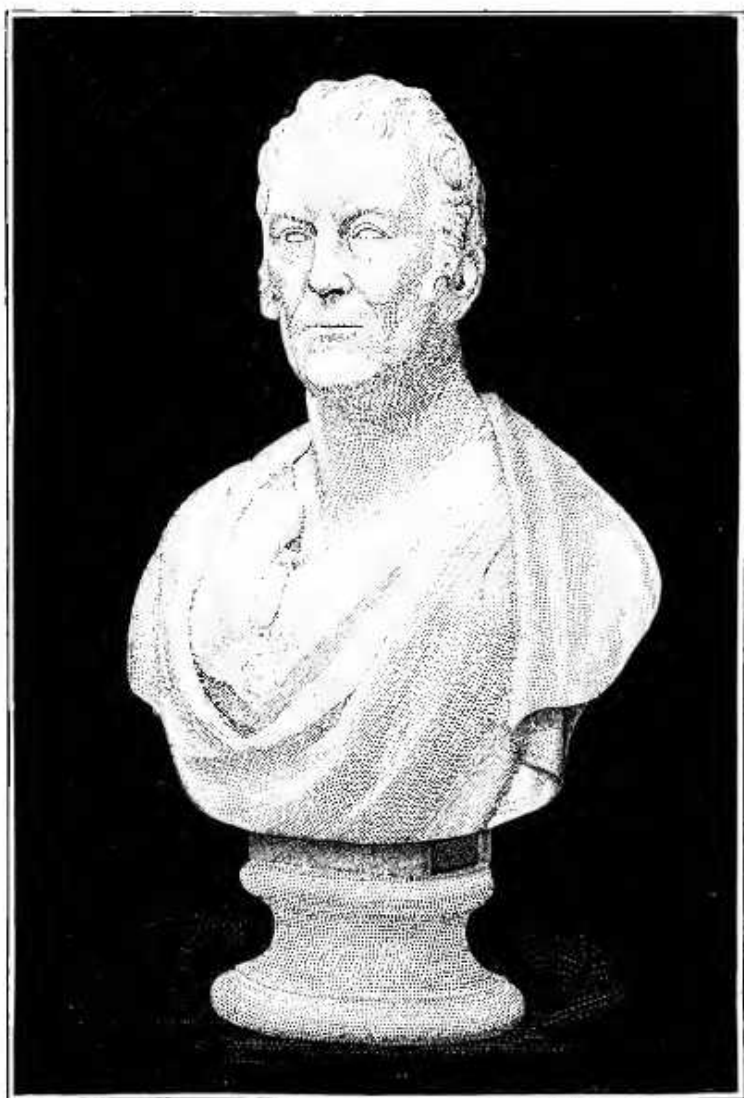
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H. W. FRENCH

**ART AND ARTISTS
IN CONNECTICUT**



COL. JOHN TRUMBULL. FROM THE MARBLE BUST
IN THE YALE ART GALLERY.

THE PIONEERS OF ART IN AMERICA.

ART

AND

ARTISTS IN CONNECTICUT.

BY

H. W. FRENCH.



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Dedication.

THERE is a custom, a very good and appropriate custom, of honoring heroes with laudations of one kind or another, that shall to some extent indicate their noble deeds. Certain considerations entitle Connecticut to the position of a heroine among her sister States. As such this tribute is offered, in the belief that a record of her art-life will be to her glory; and is respectfully dedicated to the people of the State.



INTRODUCTION.

THE history of the fine arts in a single State, at first thought, would appear either thoroughly insignificant, or so closely allied to the art-life of other States as to be of no interest if isolated and prepared without reference to those others. Nevertheless, the more careful the study bestowed upon the subject, the more evident it will become that there may be exceptions. One intimate with the history of the fine arts in Connecticut will be readily convinced that this State presents, to the lover of art, a romance richly meriting an individual chronicle.

The subject is one which has been much neglected throughout the States, even by those who derive the most benefit and pleasure from the productions of art. This lack of interest is due in great part to ignorance and prejudice, which the good public will gladly do away with if it may be made apparent, together with a means of relief. We take a national pride in the perfection of that which comes in competition with the productions of Europe. Strangely, in the arts of painting and sculpture, that most of all display the direct power of man's mind and hand, there is less interest and enthusiasm on the part of the public than in any other production. Doubtless art depends upon justice for success. But the public is not always just. Not that it is in the heart of man to abuse willingly, but that unintentionally many hinderances are placed in the way of art-progress, and much injustice done. The most comprehensive view of a landscape, a day, or a lifetime, is a retrospective view.

If the signs of the times be true, that the love of art is waxing strong in the States, a glance backward, before too many steps are taken, may be of great value in securing a progress which shall be warned by the failures of the past, advised by the experiments, encouraged and directed by the successes. We can more easily recognize and denounce injustice and prejudice when we see them in history than when they become a part of daily life and common custom. Cause and effect are then more clearly defined in their relationship. Just now is a time of unusual enthusiasm, a season of art-revival, such as in former days precluded the advent of men like Apelles and Angelo. There will be grand results in the United States outgrowing from this: and that State to set herself most systematically and emphatically to the task of taking the tide at its full flood will be the first to be led on to fortune.

A local history of art, which, as in the case of Connecticut, covers but little over a century, cannot well be more or less than a biographical record of artists who have borne their part. Upon this conclusion such sketches have been carefully prepared. A few important facts are culled from former publications; but it has been possible to gather many personal recollections concerning almost every artist, and the greater part of each history given hereafter will be formed from entirely new matter. Every living artist has been consulted, either personally or by letter; the former being the case with a very large majority. If any thing in the coming papers shall prove of value, it is due to the fact that hardly an artist who has been consulted has expressed an unwillingness to assist in the preparation of the work; and, without exception, those whose names do most honor the history of art in Connecticut have been in equal ratio most ready to facilitate the collection of information. In a great variety of ways, from the abundant resources thrown open by artists and their friends, the facts, criticisms, and details have been obtained.

To make a complete history of the art, it has appeared that others than simply natives of the State should be included, — such, for instance, as, having identified themselves with the State, either by long residence, by holding important positions as instructors in art, or by having produced in the State pictures of pre-eminent merit, have obviously imparted an important influence.

While, among the practitioners in the arts of design, architects and engravers are as justly included as sculptors and painters, the large number of the latter two must exclude for the present the former: although, of the former, engravers do most emphatically belong to Connecticut; for in the history they form such an important part, that, instead of neglect, they demand especial and individual attention. This they shall receive in a more appropriate manner hereafter. For the present, painters and sculptors alone form the topic of investigation.

Among other difficulties, a great one has appeared in the absolute impossibility of grading the detailed accounts in any degree in accordance with the merits of the subjects in hand. The sketches must vary in length simply as matter of interest has been obtained bearing no relation whatever to the position of the artist in the art.

In this connection it is most seriously regretted that throughout the State many ladies, undeniably superior artists, with knowledge, talent, and possibilities rarely combined, have insisted upon holding themselves aloof from art as a profession, embracing it in the studio, rebuking it in the street. That the right to chronicle their achievements is thus withheld is unfortunate. That the influence, inspiration, and enthusiasm with which proficient and intelligent ladies, in large force, might surround the art-life of the State, are refused, is more than unfortunate. It is a grave question, whether the ability of the artist, having been bestowed, is rightfully wrapped in a napkin, locked up in a private studio for the sole pleasure and benefit of a circle of friends. Those who can do the most for art are eminently those who have not the grinding necessity for bread as the principal pigment upon every palette. Yet those who can, free-handed, labor for glory, are oftener those who shrink into seclusion, letting the art go its way, reliant upon others less able, more willing, for support,

so long as they receive the marvellous récreation and enchantment in its rare society. There is also a certain restraint naturally placed on any endeavor to speak plainly of the living. Nevertheless, there being no incentive or desire either to flatter or defame the living or the dead, it must be sufficient explanation to state that those of the present will be regarded precisely as those of the past, and what is said be said with no more consideration that it will ever be read by the subject of the biography than if the last item of the record were taken from an inscription on a marble slab.

A timely suggestion is contained in Whittier's lines : —

“Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these, ‘It might have been.’”

This thought is often, one might almost say always, present in one shape or another with the artist of sufficient merit to understand his own faults, and is with much truth attributed in some way to the lack of public sympathy. In view of this oftener just than unjust charge, it is but common charity that we base our estimates, especially in the case of artists who are dead, upon their excellences rather than their deficiencies. Such excellences it will be the aim of these papers to detect, avoiding more than a mention of weaker points. The chief desire will be, neither to criticise, nor to fix any estimate of individual or comparative ability, but, in presenting all facts of interest that can be gathered concerning the art-life of each devotee, to trust to the principle, that acquainting the public with the man may assist in the forming of individual criticisms and estimates that shall be of value not only for the past, but in the future. Therefore these papers, taking up the artist only as a part of art, shall make no pretensions whatsoever to any thing more. Nor shall the popular comparisons be instituted between the work of Connecticut artists and that of European masters, either contemporary artists or of ages past, or with the work of other American artists. Such comparisons are entertaining; when favorable, flattering; when unfavorable, energizing, perhaps. But, on the whole, they are irrelevant; and as, with possibly one branch excepted, the highest praise bestowable upon American art is that it approximates the work of certain old masters, jealousy tempts the subject into silence, while other methods are tested to raise the standard of art in our own dear land, till that time shall come, of which the hopeful prophets already detect betokenings, when America may beckon Europe, old masters and new, into realms unexplored by them, and an originality that shall be theirs to copy instead of ours to equal. The facts presented shall be only those concerning the artists as artists of Connecticut, and of which no known doubt exists. The pride and patriotism of the people of Connecticut must be depended upon, who, knowing the artist, or of him, and having seen his work; or at least being able to see it for themselves, shall appreciate a closer view of the homespun web that surrounds him; and who, knowing him better, and his work better, shall perchance love him more, and prize his work with a more profitable appreciation. If this end be reached, a great success will have been gained.

There are several important galleries of art in the State, of both public and pri-