22: Daniel Chester French *Bust of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1879)

Susan Dodge-Peters Daiss

Ralph Waldo Emerson was in his seventy-seventh year when Daniel Chester French, aged twenty-nine, modeled the original clay head from which subsequent editions in plaster, marble, and bronze were made. A photograph taken of Emerson in 1879, the year that French began work on his portrait of the writer-philosopher, reveals how much the young artist had to draw on images of the elderly writer's past in the creation of his sculpture. Emerson is photographed seated at his writing desk, an open book in his hands. His head is lowered and his shoulders and posture are slumped—more an affectionate study of an elderly gentleman, dozing as he reads, than of the great man of American letters. By 1879, Emerson had all but retired from public life. His memory had started to fail and he suffered from aphasia—a humiliating and debilitating condition for one of the country's most revered orators as well as writers.[1] The public, however, did not see the aging Emerson, as his biographer Robert D. Richardson, Jr., explains: "Emerson's reputation was so great that it had a life of its own. Eventually his fame effectively concealed him, especially from his admirers."[2]

Emerson in his study, 1879
pf Autograph File
By permission of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association and by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University

In 1879, when French proposed to Emerson that he sculpt his portrait, the request was not as forward as it might first appear. French's family had moved to Concord, Massachusetts, from New Hampshire when French was a young man and the Emerson and French families were friends. Dan—as he was familiarly called—first met with Emerson in 1869, a meeting he recalled as both cordial and daunting. "I talked with the mighty Emerson half an hour, and felt all the time like a mouse under the paw of a cat, or rather I felt exceedingly weak. He showed true politeness in talking on subjects with which I am acquainted and was as pleasant as possible; but for all that I knew he was weighing me in his mind."[3] French's skills as an artist had already been recognized and would be further encouraged by May Alcott, a member of another of Concord's leading families. His career was publicly launched in 1873 when he was awarded the commission for *The Minute Man*, a work to commemorate the centennial of the opening battle of the American War of Independence. Emerson was among the citizens who supported the selection of French for this commission, which was unveiled in 1875.

French divided the 1870s between America and Europe. After returning from Italy in 1876, he ultimately settled in Concord in 1878. His proposal to Emerson was made early in 1879, and work on the bust began in March. "I am modeling the philosopher at his own house," French wrote sculptor Thomas Ball. "I begin it with many misgivings knowing how difficult is the task & and how often it has been tried before. I have an advantage over others of having known him long & well, & if I fail it will have done no harm to try."[4]

(Facing page)
Daniel Chester French, 1850–1931
Bust of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1879
Cast after 1898
Bronze, 22 in.
Gift of the family of Alan Underberg, in his memory, 99.2

The chronicles of Emerson's life include a range of responses to French's 1879 sculpted head—some contemporary, others retrospective. The artist seemed pleased by the response: "...my bust of Mr. Emerson is pronounced a success by those who have seen it," French wrote to his brother at the end of April.[5] Mrs. Emerson was among those satisfied. In response to receiving a plaster mold of the original clay, Emerson's daughter Ellen wrote, "We have had...a ceremonious unveiling and mounted it on a

pedestal, and there she [Mrs. Emerson] says the likeness is perfect."[6] Emerson's biographer James Elliot Cabot called the bust "the best likeness of him, I think, by any artist (except the sun)."[7] Emerson, though, wasn't certain that he appreciated the resemblance French captured, as Cabot recalls: "When the bust was approaching completion he looked at it after one of the sittings and said, 'The trouble is, the more it resembles me, the worse it looks.'"[8] Emerson's often-cited quip on seeing the completed head, "Yes, that is the face I shave," has no basis in contemporary documentation, and appears to have been "authorized" years later as the poet's "historic observation."[9]

Embedded within the first-person descriptions of the creation of Emerson's portrait is the acknowledgment and poignant regret, as Cabot wrote, that it was created "unhappily so late in his life."[10] French, writing to Cabot, explained:

> *At the time I made it, as you know, Mr. Emerson had failed somewhat, and it was only now and then that I could see, even for an instant, the expression I sought. As is not uncommon, there was more movement in one side of Mr. Emerson's face than in the other (the left side), and there was a great difference in the formation of the two sides; more probably, at the time I made the bust than earlier.*[11]

The Emerson French observed before him was not the Emerson he sought to represent. Capturing the likeness and essence of the figure French knew as a younger man—the Emerson the country revered—was his intent.

Emerson was a venerable figure in nineteenth-century American culture: his public life and the advent of commercial photography coincided almost perfectly, so that by mid-century his face and his writing were equally familiar. In his journal in 1841, Emerson exclaimed,

> *Were you ever Daguerreotyped, O immortal man? And did you look with all vigor at the lens of the camera...& in your resolution to keep your face still, did you feel every muscle becoming every moment more rigid: ...and when at last you are relieved of your dismal duties, did you find the curtain drawn perfectly, and the coat perfectly, & the hands true, clenched for combat, and the shape of the face & head? but unhappily the total expression escaped from the face and you held the portrait of a mask instead of a man.*[12]

His face and figure would be frequently recorded by this new medium over the next three decades. One photograph, among the earliest known, is reproduced as the frontispiece for the first volume of Cabot's *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*.[13] "The portrait," Cabot writes in the preface, "was etched by Mr. Schoff from a photographic copy (kindly furnished by Mr. Alexander Ireland, of Manchester, England) of a daguerreotype taken in 1847 or 1848, probably in England."[14] By the 1860s, thanks to rapid changes in photographic technology, spurred by enormous popular interest, photographic images of the era's leading citizens—Emerson among them—were readily available and avidly collected.[15] In sculpting his portrait, French admits to drawing upon his own memory of Emerson. Did he also, perhaps, consult photographs that would have been accessible from the family as well as in the public domain?

The motivation behind French's request to sculpt Emerson's bust was frankly commercial. The head of Emerson as he appeared before the artist wasn't the Emerson the public would clamor to acquire. French copyrighted his portrait bust in August 1879. From his original clay model he ordered a mold, from which "an unnumbered series of plaster replicas" could be reproduced.[16] In

addition to preparing to sell plaster casts, French also began immediate conversations with carvers to issue an edition in marble, one of which was presented to Harvard University in 1883, the year after Emerson's death, another the following year to the town of Concord.[17]

The bronze edition of French's *Emerson* was undertaken as a means to provide French with a "modest income." Art historian Michael Richman tracks the first mention of casting *Emerson* in bronze in 1884 and the first production two years later.[18] Richman notes the similarities and distinctions between French's bust of Emerson in different media:

> *The essential image of the Concord philosopher—the pronounced tilt of the head, the intense stare of the eyes, and the treatment of the sideburns and hair—was not altered in the new medium. The secondary elements, however, were radically changed. The chest was greatly reduced in size, the thick rim was replaced by a thin band, and the base and shaft were reworked.*[19]

Other differences include two distinctive bases, "one freely worked, the other mechanically symmetrical."[20] Richman has also determined that the "Emerson sequence, produced over forty years, was not intended as a large edition....When a request was received, either an available bronze was sold and then replaced, or an order was sent to a foundry (French always used the lowest bidder)."[21] The Memorial Art Gallery's *Emerson* is mounted on the "mechanically symmetrical" base, which is inscribed "EMERSON" on the front and marked on the back, "CIRE PERDUE CAST. ROMAN BRONZE WORKS N.Y." Each casting is also signed in a different place, sometimes "on the shaft, or the foundry markings."[22] French signed the Gallery's version "D.C. French" on the back.

On several occasions, French recorded his personal reflections on sculpting Emerson's portrait. For all that the artist was aware from the outset that this work would reap him financial rewards, there resonates still in his language a sense of the privilege that it represented. "We all had the common experience of disappointment in meeting some celebrity....But Emerson seemed as great as he really was...."[23] Though French continued to rework this portrait, he consistently also included the date of the initial modeling—1879—in subsequent forms. The encounter with the great man himself is recorded in that date, as is the artist's struggle to honor the greatness that by then was visibly fading.

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