



***Adams Memorial***

modeled 1886-1891, cast 1969

**Augustus Saint-Gaudens**

Born: Dublin, Ireland 1848

Died: Cornish, New Hampshire 1907

**Roman Bronze Works (Founder)**

bronze

69 7/8 x 39 7/8 x 44 1/2 in.(177.4 x 101.4 x 112.9 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art Museum purchase 1970.11

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

*While originally constructed as a private memorial, because of its ambiguous features and lack of any inscription the Adams Memorial quickly became an object of immense public interest and scrutiny. Using primary sources, researcher Laura sought to investigate the history of this commissioned sculpture further.*

Researching this artwork was a bit like searching for a needle in a haystack; the amount of information the museum already knew about the history of this work and this particular cast was remarkable. I was, however, determined to find a needle - a key on which my original research could hinge. I found this “needle” in the form of primary source material; letters, books, interviews and newspaper accounts by, to and about the various people involved with the commission of the memorial. In reading the bibliographic material on this artwork, I discovered that these first-hand accounts had not been used to their fullest extent by previous authors in relating the story. As a result, I decided to piece together these bits of primary sources to retell the story of the Adams Memorial commission. In using these quotes, which as far as we can speculate have been undiluted from the original materials throughout the years, we are provided with a clearer picture and further insight into the lives of those involved and the circumstances surrounding the commission. Among those involved were Marian “Clover” Adams, the woman for whom the memorial was built and dedicated to; Henry Adams, Clover’s husband and grandson of John Quincy Adams; Augustus Saint-Gaudens, the sculptor; John La Farge, artist

and friend of Henry Adams; and John Hay, Henry Adams' friend and former personal secretary to Abraham Lincoln, later Secretary of State (1898-1905.)

Needless to say, this type of research could not simply be done by using an internet search engine; this required pouring through books and searching for just the right information that was pertinent to my objective. While time-consuming, the result was rewarding because, as I have stated previously, it allowed me to gain a better understanding of this work. The following information provides snippets of what my research uncovered.

Following his wife Clover's suicide in December of 1885, Henry Adams embarked on multi-country trip, accompanied by his friend, the artist John La Farge. It was on this trip that Adams probably conceived of having some sort of memorial built in Clover's honor. John La Farge would later give an interview published in the Washington *Evening Star* about how the work was first proposed to Saint-Gaudens. The interviewer recalled La Farge's words: "Mr. Adams described to him in a general way what he wanted, going, however, into no details . . . save the explanation that he wished the figure to symbolize "the acceptance, intellectually, of the inevitable." Augustus Saint-Gaudens immediately became interested, and made a gesture indicating the pose which Mr. Adams words had suggested to his mind . . . the sculptor made several other gestures until one of them struck Mr. Adams as corresponding with his ideas. As good luck would have it, he would not wait for a woman model to be brought in and posed in accordance with the gesture indicated by the sculptor, so Saint-Gaudens grabbed the Italian boy who was mixing clay, put him in the pose and draped a blanket over him. That very blanket, it may be stated here, is on the statue, and forms the drapery of the figure. "Now that's done," said Mr. Adams . . ."I don't want to see the statue until it's finished."

When the work was completed five years later, John Hay wrote to Henry Adams, who was in Tahiti at the time, about seeing the work in person: "The work is indescribably noble and imposing. It is to my mind St. Gaudens' masterpiece. It is full of poetry and suggestion, infinite wisdom, a past without beginning, and a future to which nothing matters – all embodied in this austere and beautiful face." Adams wrote in his autobiography, in the third-person, about his reaction of seeing the work for the first time: "His first step on returning to Washington took him to the cemetery known as Rock Creek, to see the figure which Saint-Gaudens had made for him in his absence. Naturally every detail interested him; every line; every touch of the artists; every change of light and shade; every point of relation; every possible doubt of Saint-Gaudens's correctness of taste or feeling; so that, as the spring approached, he was apt to stop there often to see what the figure had to tell him that was new; but, in all that it had to say, he never once thought of questioning what it meant."

Saint-Gaudens, of course, had to bear the brunt of most of the inquiries, but Adams' friend often turned to him for an explanation. To one friend he patiently explained: "The whole meaning and feeling of the figure is in its universality and anonymity. My own name for it is 'the Peace of God.' . . . [though] a real artist would be very careful to give it no name that the public could turn

[into] limitation of its character. With the understanding that there shall be no such attempt at making it intelligible to the average mind and no hint at ownership, I hand it over to Saint-Gaudens.” To another he wrote, “All considerable artists make it a point of compelling the public to think for itself . . . Every man is his own artist before a work of art.” One woman though was lucky enough to get a rare answer out of the artist himself. Mrs. Barrett Wendell saw John Hay and Saint-Gaudens observing the memorial and she asked Saint-Gaudens what he called the figure. “He hesitated and then said, ‘I call it the Mystery of the Hereafter.’” Then she asked, “‘it is not happiness?’ ‘No,’ he said, ‘it is beyond pain and beyond joy.’ Hay turned to her and said, ‘Thank you for asking. I have always wished to know.’”

Years after the completion of the sculpture, Henry Adams for fun would sometimes linger around the memorial to hear the comments of tourists. Amusement aside, he fretted that the grave was turning into a tourist attraction and that he could never get ten minutes peace there without some group coming by, grumbling: “It will be a dusty roadside, as it was at Athens and Pompeii.” To the public, the memorial quickly became a matter of speculation and even controversy. A contemporary press report labeled it “Despair” and described it as “weirdly fascinating.” “The [reverend] of Rock Creek church thought it a shocking piece of agnosticism and hoped to get the “unchristian monument out of his churchyard.” These . . . views elicited an indignant letter to the *Nation* [magazine] defending the work as the most memorable created by Saint-Gaudens and a salutary departure from “conventional mortuary art.”

Regarding this last quoted sentence, I think it would be a worthwhile endeavor for future research to explore what contemporary mortuary art looked like in order to further understand why Saint-Gaudens’ sculpture caused such a commotion during the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. The question could be phrased as follows:

- **What did other nineteenth-century funerary memorials look like created by American artists? Did Augustus Saint-Gaudens create any other funerary memorials besides the Adams Memorial?**

### **Selected Bibliography:**

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