The Literary Estate of Lorado Taft

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OF the 361 great Americans proposed for inclusion in *A National Program for the Publication of Historical Documents*—a report made to the President in 1954 by the National Historical Publications Commission—47 have worked in the fields called in current academic parlance the humanities, which in the *Report* are limited to architecture, music, painting, literature, and sculpture. The name of only one sculptor appears in the first group of 112, whose papers were recommended for immediate attention—Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848-1907), "One of the greatest of American sculptors." Three others, in the second group, are listed by name and dates only: William Rimmer (1816-79), William Rush (1756-1833), and Lorado Taft (1860-1936). Though the authors of the *Report* made it abundantly clear that their recommendations were neither complete nor final, it is somewhat puzzling to see the physician-would-be-artist Dr. Rimmer listed at all, whereas a casual scanning of Lorado Taft's *History of American Sculpture* suggests any number of worthier subjects—Henry Kirke Brown or Taft's contemporary Daniel Chester French, for instance.

There is no doubt that Lorado Taft was himself of "national stature," to use the phrase of the *Report*, "ranking at or near the top" in his field. The exhaustive study of Taft as sculptor and artist by Lewis W. Williams II demonstrates that Lorado Taft as a sculptor "was in the forefront" in a number of ways—"in subject matter, in the search for new functions for sculpture in our society, in a sense of the monumental, and in the use of new materials"—and that "his influence counted."[1]

To have "influence" on his environment—to create and increase the taste for beauty in nature and in the objects with which man surrounds himself—was Taft's lifelong wish. This desire, indeed,

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[1] Lewis W. Williams II, *Lorado Taft: American Sculptor and Art Missionary*, p. 216 (Chicago, 1958).

was as important to him as the need for expressing himself in sculpture. His naturally great and consciously cultivated gifts of imparting his enthusiasm to any audience were great assets in his truly missionary efforts. Dr. Williams concludes his appraisal with the assertion that "Taft did keep close to the people and to the American sculptors of his generation—close but a little ahead. The man himself was a monument equal to, if not surpassing anything else he created."[2]

Though both Williams and, before him, Ada Bartlett Taft in her small volume on Taft[3] attempt in different ways and moods to convey the "great and uncommon qualities" of the artist and man, using liberally the device of letting the subject speak with his own words, it is clear that separate publication of Taft's letters and some of his other papers would reveal these qualities more clearly than does any description or commentary. From the Taft collection at the University of Illinois and a few papers elsewhere, Williams has made a chronology of Taft's letters sent and has listed the letters received, by sender and date.

Most of the correspondence was given to the university, along with a collection of plaster casts and a few original works, shortly after the artist's death; it was turned over to the university library in the spring of 1962. There are over 500 letters by Lorado Taft (most of them holograph) and over 400 letters sent to him from 1875 to 1936. Williams lists also a number of Taft letters in other collections and in private possession. The group of 200 items at the Chicago Historical Society, as reported in Philip M. Hamer's *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* (New Haven, 1961), contains 28 autograph letters of Lorado Taft; the rest are letters written to him, including five by Vachel Lindsay and one by Willa Cather. The most valuable of this group of letters for the sudy of Taft as a man are perhaps those received from his friend Henry B. Fuller; these were apparently not accessible to Williams.

Taft's own letters, however, most of which are at the University of Illinois, are the most valuable source for a true understanding of his personality. They are unique monuments of a man who—endowed with excellent native capacities of heart, mind, and will—had a strong desire to develop those capabilities in harmony with his environment and for the benefit of his universe, including himself. Ada Bartlett Taft writes that, of all philosophical pronounce-

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

[3] *Lorado Taft, Sculptor and Citizen* (Greensboro, N. C., 1906).

ments, he valued most one from Spinoza: "I am certain that the good of this life cannot lie in the possession of those things which for one man to possess is for others to lose, but rather in those things which all may possess alike, and when each man's prosperity increases his neighbor's."[4]

Of the letters Lorado received from members of his family, only a few from his father and two from his mother are listed by Williams. There are many others. Among them are letters he received from his father, filed with Lorado's own letters sent during the summer of 1882. In that year Don Carlos, the father, made his son a prolonged visit and traveled with him for several months over northern Europe, including England, Ireland, Scotland, France, and Belgium. Lorado mentions receiving missives from his family in practically every one of his many letters and postals sent home.

The following postal card may serve as an example; it was written on July 24, 1887, from Paris, during Lorado's third sojourn there. It is addressed to his father, Prof. D. C. Taft, Hanover, Kansas. From 1884 on, Don Carlos lived there and worked in the banking business with his second son, Florizel Adino, after having lost his position with the University of Illinois in the fall of 1882. It reads as follows:

I am devoting my spare time to your letters of the olden time. Whenever I start on an omnibus journey I take 4 or 5 in my pocket, am reading them in order. They are as interesting as a serial story. Am about commencement time '81 and the succeeding month at present. Have just been reading about the frivolous cow who did not appreciate her privacy, one of the cutest letters you ever wrote. I have laid it out to send to Carrie; her mother will appreciate it if she does not. I think they must be published some day. Possibly if I get to be famous, a selection might be made from mine also and worked over, then instead of "Lord Chesterfield to his Son" we might have "Don Carlos' Correspondence with his Son." I could get some bright fellow to *rewrite* mine, and we would have quite a cute work!

Took Grieg's two S[unday] Schools today to give him a little rest in the country. Also "preached" vigorously this eve. Never felt so well. Called on Mercié yesterday and two other prominent French sculptors, was well received. Joyful times. - Radie -

[On margin:] Mr. French and I dined together last night. He is one of our very best Am[erican] sculptors and a "good feller."

The style of this one postal card is representative of the entire body of letters, and the reference to rereading earlier letters is also typical. From very early days Lorado reminded his family

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

at intervals to save his letters in good order—obviously so that he might reread them at any time. No doubt this feeling accounts for the practically complete file. "Carrie" was to become his first wife three years later. The humorous incident with the cow and the serious treatment of the idea of having his father's letters published some day (possibly even some of his own, "if I get to be famous") are topped with the brilliant play on historical and literary symbols in the hilarious reference to "Don Carlos' Correspondence with his Son."

The letters written by father and son simultaneously, during their trip together in Europe in the summer of 1882, should probably be published together; they have frequent mutual references and they consciously supplement each other.

Besides the letters there are over 120 other manuscripts, including many of Lorado's school essays—his master's thesis was on simplified spelling, which he and his father practiced for many years—and many speeches, diaries, and financial and business records (contracts for commissions).

One item should be made available independently; it would not only give still more proof of Taft's close relationship with his family but would become a children's classic. This is the *Grandparents Gazette*, which Lorado "published and edited"—aided on occasion though halfheartedly by his younger brother, Florizel Adino—during the period February 1874-March 1875.[5] The genuine humor and delightful precociousness (obviously engendered as much by his family's ever-present encouragement as by the drive in the young man himself), with the clear and pronounced marks of the region and of midnineteenth century America, could bring as much mirth to succeeding generations of big and little children as have *Max und Moritz* or *Huckleberry Finn.*

[5] The author has edited this quaint product of a 14-year-old boy and intends to bring it out with all its original illustrations.

Miserere Nobis

To generalize about the Welfare State or the Affluent Society requires, one would think, as much expert knowledge as it does to write about past revolutions—perhaps more, for there are many Blue Books and White Papers and yards and yards of Hansard to be worked through, from which earlier ages were mercifully free.

—Editorial in the BBC *Listener*, 58:420 (Sept. 20, 1962). Quoted by permission of the British Broadcasting Corporation.