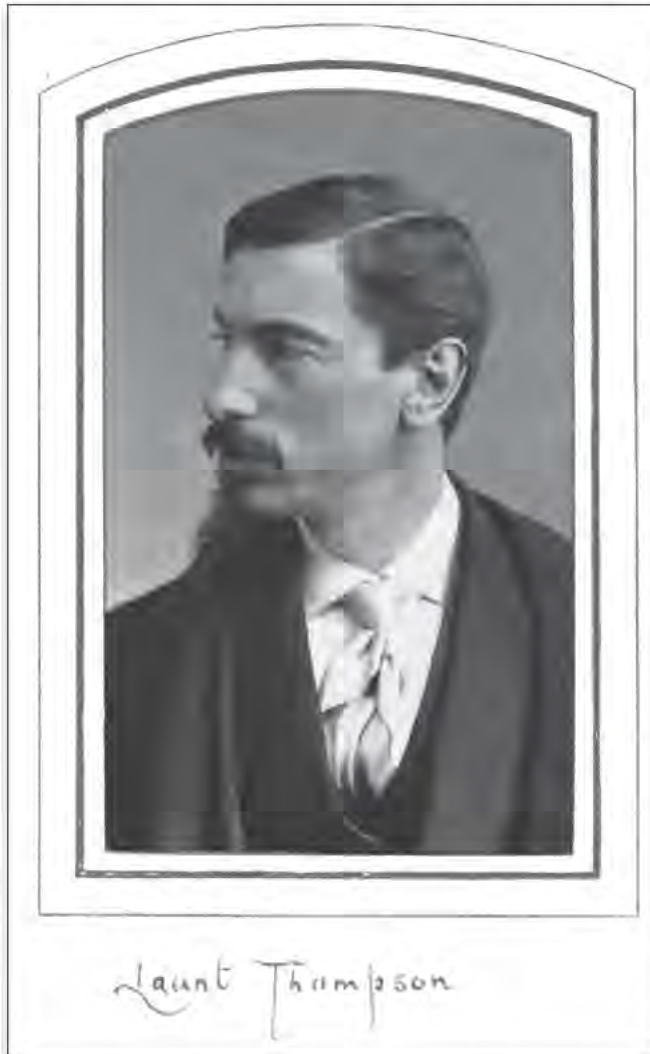


Launt Thompson: Struggle And Success

BY MICHAEL BURKE

One of the most successful American sculptors of the post-Civil War era was Irish-born Lancelot (Launt) Thompson. The son of Launcelot Thompson and Elizabeth St. John Tooker, he was born on February 8, 1833 on a small farm in Abbeyleix, County Laois, then known as Queen's County. The land is still an active farm, but the farmhouse is long gone. When Launcelot senior died in 1847 Elizabeth emigrated to America with her two sons, Launt and Maurice. She immediately settled in Albany, New York. This would indicate that she had some connection there, either relatives or friends, as this was at the beginning of the Irish diaspora resulting from the Great Hunger, and most of the numerous Irish who landed in New York City stayed there if they had no place else to go. There is no indication that the Thompsons were directly affected by the potato crop failure, but most likely Mrs. Thompson, with two young boys, simply could not work the farm, and there is no record of any close relatives in the vicinity who would have been able to help.



A CHANGING EARLY INTEREST

We know little of Thompson's childhood in Albany and practically nothing about his brother. We know he went to school and completed his

education by age fourteen, which was average for the time, since educational requirements were very different in mid-nineteenth century. He seems to have had an unremarkable academic career, but the teenage Launt Thompson apparently aspired to a career in medicine. In a stroke of good fortune, Albany had an excellent medical school, the Albany Medical College, now part of the State University of New York, and one of their professors, the renowned surgeon Dr. James H. Armsby, agreed to take on the young man as an office boy, which would expose him to the

world of medicine. In those days a student could apprentice with a practicing physician and, as long as he passed the state examination, could legally become a doctor. Launt, however, seems to have aspired to medical school and was probably hoping for help from Dr. Armsby. Also, he had been sketching since his early teenage years and, considering the picturesque area where he lived,

Photo:

Launt Thompson arrived in New York City as a young man 1856 and enjoyed almost immediate success. His talent as a sculptor was quickly recognized. Handsome and possessing what he called "Irish charm," he hosted weekly receptions in his studio at the Tenth Street Studio Building and got to know contemporary avant-garde artists and writers. Courtesy of The Library Company of Philadelphia.

Michael Burke discovered sculptor Launt Thompson while doing research on writer Fitz-James O'Brien. They were friends and members of the loosely connected group of nineteenth century New York artists known as "bohemians." The research showed Thompson to be a fascinating and complicated character. Recently Michael has been working with a group called Irish Heritage Towns to curate a photo exhibit of Launt Thompson's significant works. The exhibit is to run in New York City, Albany, New York, and Abbeyleix and Dublin, Ireland—and will be sponsored by Irish cultural organizations and the Irish government. Michael Burke is currently working on a biography of John William Mackay, the quintessential Irish-American success story: born in a Dublin slum in 1830 and died in his London mansion in 1902, one of the wealthiest men in the world. Burke lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife of forty-three years, Claire, who is also of Irish descent. ©2020. Published with permission of Michael Burke.

Illustration: Erastus Dow Palmer was an important 19th-century sculptor and a mentor for Launt Thompson. Palmer's first show presented twelve marble statues at the National Academy of Design in New York City. His most famous work was "The Captive," a sensual nude created in marble. He named his son, Walter Launt Palmer, who became a portrait and landscape painter, after Thompson. Courtesy of New York Public Library Picture Collection.



Illustration: The Tenth Street Studio Building was constructed between Fifth and Sixth Avenue in New York City in 1857. It was the first modern facility in the City designed to serve the needs of artists like Launt Thompson, and it became a center of the New York art world for the remainder of the 19th century. The building helped to give Greenwich Village, in particular, a reputation as a vital community of artists in America. In the building's initial years, Winslow Homer took a studio there, as did Edward Lamson Henry, and many artists of the Hudson River School. Courtesy of Lehigh University and Wikipedia.

most of his early works were landscapes. As was to happen many times in his life, fortune smiled on him. Dr. Armsby took a liking to the young man and, when he saw the sketches, he was so impressed he showed them to his friend, landscape painter William Hart. Hart was also impressed, encouraged Thompson, and gave him study materials. All doctors begin their studies with anatomy, however, and this is what may have been the first major turning point in Launt Thompson's life. He decided that he was more interested in observing and drawing the human form than in examining and treating it. He made his decision quickly and, with Dr Armsby's approval, changed his career path from medicine to art.

Once again, luck was on Launt Thompson's side, and he managed to secure a position with the successful and well-known Albany sculptor, Erastus Dow Palmer. He started out cleaning up as a studio boy, worked his way up to apprentice, and finally became an assistant to the artist. He stayed with Palmer for nine years, and the two became lifelong friends, with Palmer serving as best man at Thompson's wedding and naming one of his sons (Walter Launt Palmer) after Thompson.

After nine years Thompson felt he had learned enough of the techniques of sculpture and branched out on his own, with the blessing and support of Palmer, who used his influence to get his protegee's career started. Thompson gravitated down the Hudson River to New York City, then, as now, the center of the art world in America. He managed to rent a work studio in the coveted Tenth Street Studio Building, a newly constructed building (no longer in existence) which was the first building in New York City designed exclusively to provide studios for artists. It was a non-residential commercial building. As part of his lifelong tendency, Launt made friends with the other tenants, all aspiring young artists, many of whom would become successful, such as the Hudson River School painters George Henry Brougham, Charles Temple Dix, and Jervis McEntee. Soon, Thompson would host weekly afternoon gatherings of artists and writers. The wife of his close friend, author Thomas Bailey Aldrich, wrote years later in her memoirs that "Mr. Launt Thompson's studio was one of the largest, and as he was always a great favorite, choice spirits were to be met there day and



night." Thompson managed to secure an apartment nearby and found a roommate to share the living expenses. The roommate, James Pinchot, an aspiring artist himself, and Thompson enjoyed a long mutually beneficial friendship. Thompson became associated with a group of avant-garde artists and writers known as "bohemians." There

were many well-known names in the group, among them writer Fitz-James O'Brien, artist Sol Etynge, who later went on to illustrate the works of Charles Dickens, and the poet Walt Whitman, who occasionally brought his friend, Lola Montez, the Irish born "performance artist." Their center was a restaurant and saloon known as Pfaff's, located on Broadway and Waverly Place. The building is still there, but the restaurant is not. Their nightly reserved table was in the cellar, underneath the Broadway sidewalk. Pfaff enjoyed having them, as their presence brought in middle class customers eager to see the bohemians. Pfaff's was akin to the later Max's Kansas City, hangout of Andy Warhol and his retinue of artists, models, film makers, and various hangers on.

EARLY SUCCESS & RISING CAREER

Launt Thompson's career began to thrive almost immediately. He started by doing cameos and relief profile portraits on commission. They became so popular he was soon taking on commissions for marble portrait busts (which soon evolved into the newly popular medium among American artists) and for pieces cast in bronze. What catapulted him into artistic stardom was a marble bust of James Capon Adams, entitled "The Trapper." Adams was a legendary woodsman, hunter and trapper known as "Grizzly Adams" who experienced an epiphany in mid-career and resolved never again to harm another living creature. His life and legend were so popular that he did well as a performer and trainer of animals. Ironically, he eventually died as a result being mauled by a grizzly bear. His life was profiled in books, film, and eventually a television series that was popular in America in the 1960s. Unfortunately, the bust is now lost. But for Thompson, this sculpture earned him admittance into the prestigious National Academy of Art as an academician. It was here that he befriended artist and inventor, Samuel F. B. Morse, a founder of the Academy. Despite his well-known dislike for anything Irish, Morse was to become a life-long friend and mentor to Thompson. Thompson's portrait bust of Morse was on display in the lobby of the Academy's building on

New York's Fifth Avenue for many years, until the Academy's closing several years ago.

Thompson's star was now definitely on the rise. He was making friends with various New York notables and doing portrait busts of them. Among the most significant was actor Edwin Booth, whom Thompson stayed close to for the rest of his life. The bust he did of Edwin Booth as Hamlet had several bronze casts, one of which remains at the entrance of the Players' club on Gramercy Park. The same building was Booth's private residence, which he left to the club (which Booth had started in 1888) in his will. There is also a cast in the famous Century Association, one of New York's oldest and most



Photo:

This bronze, one of Thomson's most remarkable pieces, was cast in 1882. Referred to as "The Eagle on the Globe," little is known about its background, but it may have been intended to reflect the growing influence of the United States as a world power in the late 1800s. Two casts are known to exist today: one, owned by the National Park Service, is in Stones National Cemetery in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The other cast is owned by the Century Association in Manhattan. Courtesy of the Century Association.

Photo:
 William Waldorf Astor,
 a younger member
 of the well-known
 New York family,
 maintained a
 friendship with Launt
 Thompson. He also
 briefly aspired to a
 career as a sculptor
 and studied under
 Thompson, but
 changed to politics.
 Astor eventually moved
 to Great Britain
 where, due to his
 generous philanthropic
 commitments, he was
 given a peerage and
 a seat in the House
 of Lords. Thompson
 enjoyed not only the
 friendship of William,
 he had a cordial
 relationship with the
 New York Astor
 family in general.
 Courtesy of the
 AmericanMenu.com.



highly regarded private art clubs. An interesting story reveals the closeness between Thompson and Booth. After assassinating President Abraham Lincoln, Edwin's brother, John Wilkes Booth, escaped and was hotly pursued. Some people mistakenly thought that Edwin had something to do with it, which was untrue. The Booth brothers hardly had anything to do with each other. Edwin was holed up in his home, depressed, thinking his career was over due to his brother. Mobs would form outside the house and slip threats under the door and harass him in other ways. Edwin's mother was staying with him, along with Launt Thompson and their close mutual friend, writer William Bailey Aldrich, when it was learned that Edwin's sister had become ill in Philadelphia. Naturally, Mrs. Thompson had to leave to attend to her daughter, but they could not open the front door for fear of an attack by the mob. Launt therefore smuggled her out the back door and through alleyways to a cab which took them across town to the Hudson River to a

ferry. Once in New Jersey, they boarded a train to Philadelphia. After settling her on the train Thompson heard a newsboy shouting about the death of John Wilkes Booth. He ran out, got a newspaper, and showed it to Mrs. Booth, who was actually relieved that her son died from a gunshot, avoiding a trial and subsequent hanging—which would have only caused pain for her and her family. While Edwin and Launt had always been good friends, this episode sealed their friendship, which remained steadfast until Edwin's death one year before that of Thompson. There was apparently something in Thompson's personality that endeared him to practically everyone he met. When once asked about this phenomenon by a journalist, he simply shrugged and said "Perhaps it's my Irish charm." This charm brought him friendship with the Astors, the most socially prominent family in New York City. While many upwardly mobile socialites would have killed for an invitation to the Astors, the young bachelor was a

frequent dinner guest. In fact, one of the Astors, William Waldorf, aspired to a career in art, and Thompson took him on as a pupil, the only one he ever accepted. Young William changed his mind and later moved to Britain where he eventually became a member of the aristocracy.

SIGNIFICANT EARLY WORKS

Thompson became a member of the Century Association and was commissioned by them to do a portrait bust of his friend, writer William Cullen Bryant, to be placed in New York's Central Park. Unfortunately, no one involved did their homework, and they were unaware that Central Park did not accept portraits of living people. It was subsequently loaned to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1874 and was later acquired by them. William Cullen Bryant was the person after whom New York's famous Bryant Park was named.

During this period Thompson also completed what was to become one of his most significant early works, the commission of which came about, like so many others, serendipitously. Cyrille C.D. Pinchot, the father of Thompson's roommate, James Pinchot, had served in the French army under Napoleon Bonaparte, whom he seems to have idolized. Pinchot was from a fairly well-off family, but after the battle of Waterloo he realized that the best thing for his future was to emigrate to America. He took what he could of his wealth and settled in Pennsylvania, where he became a successful land investor and merchant. He built a large house where Launt Thompson became a frequent guest. Pinchot commissioned Thompson to do a full-size portrait statue of Napoleon which he intended to have placed in the square of a town he was helping to found in eastern Pennsylvania, to be called Milford. It seemed Pinchot and his family were satisfied with the results, but the statue was probably far from what they had envisioned. Unlike every other depiction of Napoleon, posed heroically, often at the head of an army, Thompson made the figure that of an older man, slightly paunchy, walking with his head down and

hands clasped behind his back, clearly dejected. The marble statue was completed in 1866. A plaster version was exhibited in the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, where it was apparently well received. The people of Milford, Pennsylvania, however, were not as appreciative. They rejected the placement of a bronze cast, done in 1889, of the statue in their town square or anyplace else in the town. This was not done for aesthetic reasons, but rather, political ones. Many Americans considered themselves in the vanguard of the growth of worldwide democracy and, to the people of Milford, a statue of what they considered a foreign dictator had no place in the center of their American town. The Metropolitan Museum



Photo:

This bronze cast depicting Napoleon Bonaparte was commissioned by Cyrille C.D. Pinchot and created by Launt Thompson in 1889. Pinchot had served in Napoleon's army and was forced to leave France in 1816. He ultimately built a fortune in America and intended the statue for display in the town square of Milford, Pennsylvania. But it was rejected by the citizenry who considered it a monument to a foreign despot. The statue was acquired by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and currently is on display at the Grey Towers National Historic Site in Milford. Courtesy of Smithsonian American Art Museum.

of Art felt differently and eagerly accepted the loan of the statue and kept it on display until it was later donated by the Pinchot family to the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It is now, along with two other Thompson portrait busts, on extended loan to the Grey Towers Historic Site in Milford, Pennsylvania, where they are on permanent exhibit. Grey Towers was a mansion built by James Pinchot, who did not succeed as an artist but did very well in the wallpaper business. The Pinchots went on to become a prominent American family and later donated the site to the USDA Forest Service which today maintains it as a research facility with its art gallery open to the public.

The Napoleon statue did much for Launt Thompson's career. He was immediately commissioned by the United States Military Academy to do a statue of Major General John Sedgwick, who died heroically in the Battle of Spotsylvania in Virginia. Thompson completed the full-length statue and then went one step further by adding a bronze relief depicting the General's death during the battle, which was placed on the statue's granite base. Both the statue and the relief were considered extremely well done and are now a stop on the official tour of West Point. The young sculptor was now doing so well financially that he could afford to take the "Grand Tour" of Europe's major cities. Throughout the nineteenth century this was a tradition and almost a rite of passage for affluent Americans. Although Thompson was doing well, he was far from affluent, so the tour was for him a study trip. Many upwardly mobile artists did this and, as it happens, several of Thompson's friends were going at the same time. Not wanting to lose his coveted studio, he sublet it to another of Palmer's former proteges, Charles Calverley, and left with Jervis McEntee for Paris. They caught up with John Ferguson Weir and Frederic Edwin Church in Rome. Thompson and McEntee then went on to Venice and Florence, all the while studying the magnificent works of art on view. While in Florence, Thompson called on the elderly famous Irish-American sculptor, Hiram Powers. Thompson then returned to Paris and then on to London where he visited the Royal Academy and the British Museum.

After a very educational tour he returned to New York in 1869 and to another turning point in his life. His career was now prospering with numerous commissions, among them the Union Army Standard Bearer for the City of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and a full size portrait of Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, commissioned by the United States Congress, and placed at the entrance of the Old Soldiers' Home (now the Armed Forces Retirement Home) in Washington, D.C., which was founded by Scott. This was one of the most expensive statues commissioned by Congress up to that time at \$15,000.00, then a considerable sum. The statue is still in its original position. He was also commissioned by Yale University to do a full-size portrait of Reverend Abraham Pierson, the school's co-founder and first rector. It still stands on the campus, and several plaster casts are also located indoors. In addition to his payment, Yale bestowed on Thompson an honorary Master of Arts degree, this to someone who had never attended college.

Photo:

Thompson was commissioned by Yale University in 1878 to create this statue of Abraham Pierson, one of the founders of the Collegiate School which later became Yale University. The statue still stands in the school's old-campus section. Yale was so pleased with Thompson's work that they granted him an honorary Master of Arts degree. Courtesy of Ourfamilytree.org.



The commission that changed his life, however, came from Dr. Elephalet Nott, president of Union College in Schenectady, New York, for a bust of college professor, Isaac W. Jackson, a Union army officer killed

**Photo:**

This statue of Major General John Sedgwick is a stop on the officially conducted tour of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Sedgwick was a West Point graduate and an American hero who was killed in the Civil War. He was wounded three times in the battle of Antietam, fought at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg, and was killed in the battle of Spotsboro. He was directing cannon placement and encouraging his troops when he was struck by a sniper's bullet. He became the highest ranking Union officer killed in the War. Courtesy of Forwhattheygave.com

in the Civil War. Living with Nott and his wife was their granddaughter, Maria Louisa Potter, daughter of Alonzo Potter, Episcopal bishop of Pennsylvania, and Sarah Maria Nott, Elephalet's daughter, who died in giving birth to Maria. Their meeting may have been a version of love at first sight, for the young couple were married within a year. Apparently, the Bishop, who had six sons already, could not properly raise an additional child by himself. It turned out in the long run to be possibly the best thing that could have happened to Maria. At that time women did not have much opportunity for higher education. However, being raised by a college president and his wife,

Maria received an excellent "home schooled" education. Union College, like most other schools, did not admit women but by the time she reached majority she was educated in the classics, Latin and Greek, English, History, and was fluent in French, Italian, and German.

LIFE IN NEW YORK & FLORENCE

After returning to New York from his European tour Launt had resumed his active social life. This time, however, he was admitted to many of the city's prestigious clubs. Along with the Century Association, of which he was already a member, he was accepted into the Union League and the Lotos Club. He was elected vice

Illustration:
Maria Louisa (Molly) Thompson, Launt Thompson's wife, was intelligent and accomplished. She was the child of Alonzo Potter, the Episcopal bishop of Pennsylvania, and Sarah Maria Nott, daughter of Eliphalet Nott, president of Union College in Schenectady, New York. She and Thompson were married in 1869. Her education and training enabled her to become a successful author of at least one book and many articles published in American magazines. After Thompson's illness forced him to return to the United States, she stayed in Italy where she remained for the rest of her life. Courtesy of Potterhistory.com.



Mrs. Launt Thompson

president of the National Academy of Design. After their marriage, Launt and Maria were a happy, socially active young New York couple. Her brother, Henry Codman Potter, became Episcopal bishop of New York and proved to be one of the most progressive and far-thinking clergy in the city. While rector of Grace Church in Manhattan, among one of his most unusual ministries (which could have possibly gained him admission into the Guinness “book of world records”) was the establishment of his own tavern in 1904. Potter was concerned about the “evils of alcohol” among the working class and newly arriving immigrants. However, he believed in temperance, not abstinence, probably because he realized that abstinence simply did not work—as America was to realize several years later with the debacle of Prohibition. The bar was intended as a relaxing place for the “working class” where the staff would monitor and guide patrons to more

“responsible imbibing.” He hoped the atmosphere would be “jovial and free-spirited without becoming debaucherous.” Since the bar was located near an entrance to the newly established New York subway, it was known as the Subway Tavern. The idea was rejected by practically all the other New York clergy, and the tavern was soon closed. Previously, Henry Potter joined his uncle, Horatio Potter, then Episcopal bishop of New York, in founding the cathedral church of St John the Devine, the largest Protestant cathedral in the world.

In 1871 the Thompsons first child was born, a son named Launcelot (called Lance) Clarkson (named after her brother, who later became president of Union College). Soon, however, they decided to spend some time in Europe and traveled to Florence, Italy, at that time one of the major artistic and cultural centers in Europe. They found a comfortable apartment at 109 Via

di Serragli, near where Hiram Powers and the American poet Robert Browning had lived. This is where Maria blossomed and truly came into her own. The Thompson's apartment became a focal point for visiting Americans, and any who came to Florence were entertained by them. Maria, who was known as Molly, was fluent in Italian and made friends with many of the prominent local people. This seems to have been the happiest period of her life.

One reason Launt wanted to live in Florence was its proximity to sources of superior Italian marble and a supply of inexpensive labor to help him with his work. Launt, while acting as co-host with Maria, still managed to get a great deal of work done, taking commissions from New York and shipping the finished works back there, one of which was a marble bust of Eliza Cross Pinchot, Cyrille's wife and James' mother. He also did several busts of visiting members of

William Cullen Bryant's family. It was also here where he completed a sculpture on which he had been working off and on for many years, a full-size marble and his only known nude work, called *Unconsciousness* or *The Chief's Bride*. It was based on the story of a young woman settler who had been captured by Indians. When she was eventually found by her family she chose to stay with the tribe and married the chief. Thompson also created a bust of Colonel Elias Peissner. In an ironic twist of fate, Union College professor Elias (Fritz) Peissner became a colonel in the Union army, commanding a regiment that he had raised. He died heroically in the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863. The Union College Alumni, Class of 1863, commissioned Thompson to create a bronze bust of him, which he did while in Florence. Coincidentally, Peissner, who was born in Bavaria and attended the University of Munich, had had an affair



Photo:

This piece is one of the few Thompson marble statues in existence, and the only nude. Known as "Unconsciousness or The Chief's Bride," it was worked on sporadically over thirty years by Thompson who started it in New York City, completed it in Florence, and then shipped it back to New York. It was not a commissioned work, and is now on permanent display in the Roswell P. Flower Library in Watertown, New York. Courtesy of the Albany Institute of Art and History.

Photo:
Commissioned in 1887 by the City of Providence, Rhode Island, this statue of Major General Ambrose E. Burnside is the only equestrian statue done by Launt Thompson. It received excellent reviews from contemporary art critics, especially for Thompson's rendering of the horse. Burnside had a checkered career as a soldier, politician, and arms manufacturer. The statue is Thompson's last work. Courtesy of VisitRhodeIsland.com.



while a student there with the Irish-born performance artist, Lola Montez, mistress of King Ludwig I, and later a habitué of Pfaff's, whom Thompson had, no doubt years before, met as a young man.

The Thompsons had two more children while in Florence, both daughters, Mariette Benedict and Florence Howard. They seemed to be an idyllic family until something, inexplicitly, began to go wrong.

A CHANGE AND STRUGGLE

After six years in Florence, Thompson suddenly sailed for New York. By this time he was a relatively famous person, and the explanation given

was that he was returning for public relations purposes, to keep his hand in the burgeoning post-Civil War sculpture business when practically every town in the north had to have a statue of some Union Army officer. However, there was more to it than that. It seems as if Maria Thompson requested that he leave because his behavior was gradually becoming unacceptable. There has been a great deal of speculation about this but, with the wisdom of hindsight, it appears that Launt Thompson had been suffering from some sort of mental illness for some time and was beginning to lose the struggle with it. In the 1880s psychiatry was in its infancy, and there were virtually no medications available.

The rest of Thompson's life was characterized by mood swings and periods of lucidity alternating with periods of apparent insanity. He may have had what is called today bipolar syndrome. Considering his friendly, popular personality, often being the host of social events and entertainments, he was known to be what is called a "social drinker." But throughout his bachelor days and his time in Florence, there were never troubling incidents relating to alcohol. Had he been an alcoholic, the condition would have surfaced long before this time. But upon his return to New York by himself, his drinking increased and began a downward spiral into the pathological. He took up binge drinking, and for the first time in his life was seen drunk for extended periods. This condition worsened, but he continued to work. He fell into the habit of drinking, often for several weeks, followed by weeks and even months of sobriety while he worked on current projects. Once again, his penchant for making, and keeping, friends stood him in good stead. When he understood that he was mentally incapable of handling his business affairs, his long-time friend, Samuel Lawrence, voluntarily stepped in to manage his money. Lawrence apparently was thoroughly honest and allotted an allowance to Thompson, paid his bills, and sent money to Florence for Maria and the children's living expenses. Maria was by this time a published writer and was able to supplement this money with a small income of her own and, perhaps, help from her family. All six of her brothers were overachievers and successful in their various careers: a lawyer, a congressman, a college president, a Union Army general, a colonel, an architect and, of course, the bishop.

Thompson spun into an irreversible decline. When he came back to New York he took a room at the Lotos Club. Soon his wild behavior, which included picking fights, overturning tables, and smashing dishes caused the club's board of directors to request his resignation. He then moved into the Century Association where similar actions brought similar results. Having run out of clubs as residences, he lived briefly at

the Hotel Glenham, but again the same behavior brought the same result. It was then that another old friend, John Snedecor, an artist who lived above his own picture frame shop, took him in. Thompson continued to act similarly. He was arrested several times, sometimes at the bequest of Snedecor when he was unable to handle him. Other times Thompson managed to get arrested on his own, forcing his friends to search police stations for him. At one point when they couldn't find him, they heard of a prisoner who only spoke French and Italian. This turned out to be Thompson, who had become fluent in both. All this time, however, he kept his own studio at Broadway and Thirty-fourth Street—and he continued to turn out magnificent works of art. He then moved out to a larger studio in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where he was to complete his last work. He was assisted by a



Photo: Edwin Booth was a long-time friend of Thompson who contributed generously to Thompson's financial support during his decline. Booth was one of the most acclaimed actors in America during the 19th century and was particularly recognized for his performance as Prince Hamlet and in other Shakespearean roles. A bust of Booth as Hamlet was completed by Thompson and is inside the entrance to *The Players*, a private club for performing and other artists founded by Booth. The club is across from Gramercy Park in Manhattan. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

local saloon keeper known only as Anderson, who even advanced him funds to finish the work. Anderson was repaid upon its completion. Ironically, this piece is often referred to as one of Thompson's greatest works. It was the only equestrian statue he ever did, that of Civil War General Ambrose Everett Burnside, to be placed in front of the city hall of Providence, Rhode Island. This was a commission and the subject was not the most desirable, since Burnside was a politician and arms manufacturer and not well liked. His main claim to fame came from his unusually styled facial hair which came to be referred to as "sideburns." The statue, nevertheless, received rave reviews from the art critics, especially for Thompson's sensitive rendering of the horse, which was extraordinary since he had never depicted a horse before. It was said that Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman, himself with a checkered career, attended the unveiling and was so impressed that he took Thompson for a wild ride in his buggy around a nearby park—and Thompson was sane enough to be terrified.

REFUSING A COMMISSION

Upon his return to New York, Thompson declared that he had done his last sculpture. Ironically, a British nobleman had arrived from Scotland seeking out Thompson to do a portrait bust of himself to be placed in the University of Edinburgh. When Thompson refused, the man said he could name his price, whatever it would be, and he would pay it. The nobleman left disappointed when Thompson firmly refused. Thompson was soon involved in some sort of mayhem and was arrested again, and this time he was temporarily committed to the city asylum on Blackwell's Island. His friends secured his release, but the warden warned them that their efforts were useless because he would soon be back. They ignored his warning and took him home. The warden turned out to be right. After two weeks of sanity, Thompson was arrested again, and this time committed by the court. His friends, and probably the Potters, arranged for him to be admitted to a Dr. Peterson's private asylum in Tuxedo, New York in 1890. He lasted

there for two years until Dr. Peterson gave up, claiming he could not control Thompson's wild behavior. He was transferred to Central Valley Hospital of Orange County, New York. His fees were paid by his in-laws and friends, including Edwin Booth, who never abandoned Thompson. He was eventually transferred to the State Homeopathic Asylum for the Insane in Middletown, New York, where he died of natural causes on September 26, 1894 at age sixty-one. Although no one attended his burial, his death made the papers of every major city in the United States. He was buried in a private grave in nearby Middletown's Hillside Cemetery, a beautiful small cemetery designed by Calvert Vaux, co-designer of New York City's Central Park. The cemetery records are lost, but the grave was believed to have been purchased by his brother, Maurice. A large stone slab covers the entire grave with his name and those of his parents inscribed on it, probably paid for by his friends.

Maria Louisa Potter Thompson chose to remain in Italy and raised her children there. Her son, Lance, had been sickly most of his life, but became an accountant. Because of his health he was rejected for service in the Italian army during the Great War, but did voluntary accounting work for the army and apparently died as the result of overwork. The eldest daughter, Mariette Benedict, worked as a nurse in France during the war. She worked in several hospitals, surviving numerous attacks and bombardments. At one point she was ordered to evacuate because the German Army was preparing to attack her hospital. She refused to abandon her patients and ignored the order. The attack never took place, and she was awarded the Croix de Guerre in 1919 by the French government for her courageous work. She later became a sculptor herself, with work exhibited in galleries and museums. She married American businessman, Lawrence Hayworth Mills, Jr. They lived in Morristown, New Jersey, and eventually moved to Paris, where they became involved with the American ex-patriot community and befriended such artists as Marcel Duchamp and Constantin Brancusi. They had no chil-

dren. During and after the war, daughter Florence Howard used her fluency in four languages to help resettle displaced soldiers and civilians. She married an Italian nobleman, Count Gian-Luigi Perticucci de Guidici and remained in Italy for the rest of her life.

Maria Thompson spent her remaining years in Florence where she died on July 17, 1916. She probably survived on the continued sales of Launt's works and her own writing. Her death was covered by the *New York Times*, which indicated the legacy of Launt Thompson by noting that over twenty years after his death, his life was still remembered. The article had an unusual title, "Feared Burial Alive," with the subtitle "Mrs. Launt Thompson Asked for Cremation in Her Will." A clause in the will, drawn up in 1910, states: "As I die a member of the Roman Catholic Church, if the permission of the church can by any possibility be obtained, I wish my body to be cremated as soon as possible after my death." It is unclear whether or not her request was granted. Mrs. Thompson had said that she wished to be cremated as she feared "premature burial." It may not have occurred to her that premature cremation might have been as equally unpleasant as premature burial. It is also unusual that the daughter and sister of Episcopal bishops converted to Roman Catholicism. Launt Thompson, who never seemed to express any interest in religion, was probably born into the Church of Ireland. There was apparently no religious service at his burial. Most likely, there would have been a Catholic funeral mass for Maria.

Launt Thompson's work made an important contribution to American sculpture in the late nineteenth century, but his life story may prove to be even more significant. The legacy he left of magnificent artworks were mostly done while he was suffering from severe mental illness. Unlike today, at that time there were no medications available to alleviate the suffering of the mentally ill. We can only imagine what Thompson endured, and it is miraculous that he managed to produce anything at all, let alone the numerous beautiful works he created. The revelation of his life and accomplishments could become a significant tool in the understanding and approach to

treating mental illness, for which many people now have come to believe there is much room for improvement. Hopefully, it will soon be understood that rather than having been a failure, Launt Thompson's life was a heroic struggle and ultimately a notable success.

Sources

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There are few published resources on Launt Thompson. The definitive piece on Thompson's work is by Elizabeth K. Allen in *Antiques* magazine, published in November, 2002. The title of the article is "Launt Thompson, New York Sculptor." She is an art historian, not a biographer, so her extremely thorough writing is focused on Thompson's work not on his life. I published an earlier article on Thompson's life and subsequent obscurity, "Whatever Happened to Launt Thompson?" which appeared in *Irish America* magazine for September, 2014. (Irish associates later sent me an article from the *Irish Times* for October 25, 2019 about Thompson that was surprisingly similar to my article in *Irish America*). There are general articles on Thompson's life in *Wikipedia*, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th edition), and similar sources. There is also some information on Thompson and other New York bohemians in the archive, "The Vault at Pfaff's," held by Lehigh University (Pfaff's.web.lehigh.edu).

Maria Thompson became a writer but left no information about Launt Thompson or their lives together. She published one book, *The Legend of St. Guendoline*, and many magazine articles. One article took a position against slavery and was published in the 1860s in *Harper's Weekly*.