The Daily Argus.

Independent in Everything.

Saturday, December 27, 1873.

John Rogers, the Sculptor.

The art of sculpture has come down to us from the schools of classic Greece and Rome, with all the subsequent productions of European skill, and yet it has remained for American genius to introduce a new and important feature. Is it not strange that neither ancient nor modern statuary has attempted anything of a social nature? The ancients have left us only two groups—the one "Cupid and Psyche," and the other the "Laocoon"—while of modern European art, Canova's "Graces," and Thorwalsden's "Christ and Apostles," and a few others are all that can be named. Outside of allegorical or monumental art, groupings were hardly dreamed of, and it has therefore been reserved for America to develop a new school of statuary, and this has been done by Mr. John Rogers, of New York. There are persons in Rock Island who have met Mr. Rogers in foreign lands, and who, as well as our readers generally, will be interested in some details of the life of a man who has done honor to America in other lands as well as at home.

EARLY STRUGGLES.

In 1848, just twenty-five years ago, a young man entered a machine shop in Manchester, New Hampshire, and desired to learn the trade. He was nineteen, and had seen considerable of life. He was a native of Salem, that town once so famous for witchcraft, and had served not only as a clerk in a store, but also in an engineering corps; and had in addition to this spent a few months in Spain, in pursuit of health. From his earliest day this youth had felt a passion for art, but his way had been hedged up until he now resolved to devote himself to mechanics. As a consequence, he passed seven years in this service, working his way from the turning lathe up to the draughtman's desk. About this time, however, a new idea entered his mind. One day, while in Boston, he beheld a man modeling figures in clay, and saw the power thus afforded of giving a more forcible expression than by the pencil. He immediately obtained some clay, and was surprised to find himself at home in the new art. The Manchester shop was under a press of business, and the apprentice was forced to labor fourteen hours per day; but notwithstanding this he found time to practice modeling. Often the conception of a new group would flash upon his mind during the hours of labor, and its power would be so strong that, weary as he might be, he could not rest until he had clothed it with shape, and thus giving to "an airy nothing a local habitation and a name."

MARCH WESTWARD.

From 1848 to 1857 he endured the bondage at Manchester, finding no friend to aid him. Just then an offer was made him to superintendent a machine shop in Hannibal, Missouri, but he had only spent six months in his new sphere when the panic of 1857 stopped the works; and he was, in common with thousands, thrown out of employment. He returned east, and procuring a small amount of funds he gratified his long cherished desire of seeing the works of the old masters, and passed eight months in Paris and Rome. On his return the prospects of art were discouraging, and hence he once more accepted employment, which this time was in the office of the City Surveyor at Chicago. Rogers was now thirty, and was not only master of three trades but was enriched by the experience of travel. It is not surprising to learn that that his services were highly valued.

FIRST PUBLIC WORK.

During his leisure at Chicago he modeled a group, which were presented to some ladies who were getting up a fair. It was the "checker-players," and was generally admired because of its ease, freedom and extreme naturalness. He now passed at once from the mechanical to the artistic profession, but was not fully recognized in the latter until he produced "The Slave Auction," which was exhibited in New York city in 1859. The anti-slavery enterprise was then looking for every ally to assist in the great work of liberation. Hence, Rogers' Group was welcomed by the friends of freedom as a powerful appeal to the friends of humanity, and the artist showed his true nobility in thus espousing the cause of the oppressed.

LIFE IN NEW YORK.

The young sculptor now felt encouraged to devote himself to the art which he thought he had abandoned. He went to New York city and threw himself upon the public taste. Here he learned to construct moulds for casting his groups, and received assistance from an expert workman who had learned the business in Italy. He took an attic in Broadway and issued the following unpretending business card: "John Rogers, artist, designs and executes groups of figures at his studio room, 28. N. B.—They can be packed for transportation." Mr. Rogers thus founded a new school in art, and it now remained to see how it would command patronage. This, however, was soon manifested. Instead of following Canova's example, and presenting groups of heathen deities, he seized upon living and social themes. Hence, the popular taste was at once awakened, just as Hogarth awoke it a century ago by his inimitable pictorial dramas.

ART AND WAR.

The great rebellion was prolific in works of art, and vast numbers of oil-paintings and innumerable engravings were employed to illustrate its fearful scenes. Rogers caught the inspiration of the day in no small degree. Few illustrations of camp life and of Southern experiences were so effective as those which proceeded from his hand, and few so powerfully expressed the military spirit of the day. Such scenes as "Union Refugees," "One More Shot," and "The Picket Guard," were set off by the humorous delineations of "Mail Day in Camp," "Uncle Ned's School," and the "Country Post Office." These Groups did their part, in stimulating patriotic sentiment: and the prices at which they were offered indicated the poverty to which genius is often subjected. Rogers was glad at this time to realize $3 apiece for any of these beautiful groups. Economy of the severest character was necessary, as a matter of course, and the artist lived in his study, as artists and authors have often lived before.

BETTER TIMES.

In 1862, prosperity began to cheer the young artist, and he removed to the corner of Twenty-sixth street and Fifth avenue. Such groups as "The Returned Volunteer," "The Home Guard," "The Wounded Scout," and "Taking the Oath," were produced there, and increased his hold on the public mind. The latter group is one of the most popular of his productions. It represents a Southern lady with her boy swearing allegiance in order to obtain rations, while a little negro looks on with an interest which shows that he understands the conflict in the heart of his mistress. To these have since been added "The Council of War," "Courtship in Sleepy Hollow," "The Parting Promise," and "Coming to the Parson." The former represents Grant, Stanton and Lincoln examining the plan of operations and vividly recalls the fearful scenes in the Wilderness. The second is a capital illustration of Irving's popular tale, and is the first effort of sculpture in the service of this author.

SUCCESS AT LAST.

Mr. Rogers soon found himself on the high road to success. He took a large room in the Studio Building on Fifth Avenue, opposite Madison square, where he went on elaborating his fresh designs. Orders rapidly flowing upon him he established a shop far down town (number 138 Centre street,) where about twenty men were employed making casts. Of each of his popular Groups about three thousand copies have been taken, and in all about one hundred thousand have been demanded by the public. So extended a popularity has never previously been enjoyed by any skulptor, nor is there any artist of so recent a date better known among amateurs and connoisseurs. These groups are now in demand for presents, and for parlor ornaments; and this indicates that popular taste extends in proportion to its gratification.

PERSONAL APPEARANCE.

Mr. Rogers is of tall and rather slender build, and has a countenance which, from its combination of peculiar features, may be considered one of the most interesting character. Its general appearance indicates culture, and he might be taken for a college professor or an author; but this is set off by a combination of modesty and self-conciousness, which is suggestive of the poet as well as the artist. His groups indeed, are full of poetry, and the last, which is called "The Foundling," will bring tender and saddening thoughts to every sensitive heart. Mr. Roger's studio is a place of interest, and there may be found all of the originals of his first works, A cast of a horse's head looks quietly down from its lofty niche, and a life-size bust of a Wall street broker shows that the artist is at home in all classes of modeling. He is now forty, and is on the high road to wealth, thus affording a noble example to all ambitious youth's who feel the budding of artistic genius.

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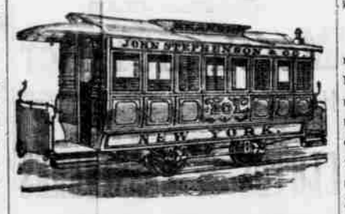

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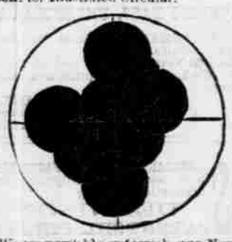

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