TREASURE OF THE MONTH

Terracotta busts of Keats and Shelley by William Wetmore Story, both c. 1876.

We assume that Mrs Ada Maud Story, who in 1910 and 1915 presented the Keats-Shelley House with a number of important letters belonging to her father-in-law, the American sculptor William Wetmore Story, also donated Story’s four portrait busts of John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning. The busts of the Brownings were later sold by the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association to the Browning Society and are now housed in the couple’s Florentine house, i.e. Casa Guidi.

William Wetmore Story was an American sculptor and poet, born in Massachusetts in 1819. He graduated from Harvard College in 1838 and Harvard Law School in 1840, but a few years later Story abandoned the law and devoted himself to sculpture. In the 1850s he and his wife, Emelyn, moved to Rome, living in Palazzo Barberini, and his apartment became a central location for American expatriates and visitors in the city. Story stayed in Italy until he died at Vallombrosa in October 1895. He is buried with his wife in the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, under a statue he designed in memory of Emelyn, called the *Angel of Grief*, which is both his last and greatest sculpture and which became recognised as one of the most powerful and touching illustrations of love and loss in the late nineteenth century.

In the era before the development and spread of photography the portrait bust was a popular way to remember as well as honour those one admired or loved. Marble busts of important personages and family members graced private homes as well as galleries and museums. Although busts were a lucrative venture for most mid-nineteenth century sculptors, William Westmore Story produced only twenty-eight in his lifetime, preferring to focus on sculptures of mythical and allegorical subjects, which, in keeping with the hierarchy of genres in art, he considered to be a higher form of art than portraiture. His most famous portrait bust was arguably his posthumous sculpture of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which was reportedly so lifelike that Robert Browning could not bring himself to look at it or accept a copy of it.

Story also had close connections with other Romantic poets, not by knowing them personally but through his literary interests; he was himself something of a self-styled Romantic poet, which naturally influenced the choice of subject for his sculptures. Busts of literary figures were a popular genre of sculpture with nineteenth-century sculptors because at that time the public idolized sentimental and romantic literary figures like Shelley, Keats and Browning. One of his very first ideas for an ideal sculpture soon after his arrival in Rome was for one of Endymion based on Keats’ poem *Endymion* (1817). Instead, Story completed a bust of Keats in 1876, and also probably Shelley’s in the same year. There is a marble version of Keats’ bust in the Rosenkranz sculpture gallery in New York, which is signed and dated ‘WWS Roma 1876’. The busts were probably first modelled in clay, then in plaster, then (in the case of Keats’ bust in New York) finally finished in marble. Usually the plaster prototype was made solely in preparation for carving the final bust in marble, but Story occasionally gave away plaster versions. The pair appear to have been made as busts in their own right, since they lack the nail holes normally associated with the carving of the marble version.

As with any posthumous portrait, the artist must rely on either memory or existent portrayals of the person. Story’s intimacy with the Brownings meant that he was able to recall Elizabeth’s likeness and personality, and in many ways probably captured her more accurately than an idealized historical portrait could have done. However, since Keats and Shelley both died while Story was very young, the poet never had a chance to meet his poetic heroes. Story therefore had to rely on other sources for the basis of his portrait busts. Story owned a mould of Haydon’s life mask of Keats, and he most likely used the mask to aid his modelling. Sculptors also often used photographs, previous portraits and measurements as well as life or death masks to achieve an accurate likeness of their subject. With the array of resources at his disposal Story produced the two lively terracotta busts which watch over the salon of the Keats-Shelley House.

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