

Thomas Ball and the Emancipation Group

Wayne Craven
Henry Francis duPont Winterthur
Professor of Art History
University of Delaware

"On leaving our hotel [in Munich] . . . the landlord came to our carriage to tell us of the terrible news, just received from America, that Abraham Lincoln and his Secretary of State, Seward, had both been assassinated. I could not free my mind from the horror of it during the rest of my journey . . ." So wrote Thomas Ball, the American sculptor, who was travelling in Europe with his family, on their way to Italy. They were returning to Florence, and they were barely settled there when he commenced the original model for the "Emancipation Group." Ball later recorded in his autobiography: "While waiting to find a studio, I could not be idle; in one of the spare rooms of my apartment I began a study, half-life size, of the 'Emancipation Group,' which had been impatiently bubbling in my brain ever since receiving those horrible tidings in Munich."² This was the commencement of a work that would undergo a constant metamorphosis in the following twelve years, appear in both bronze and marble versions, smaller than life and larger than life, and bring its creator widespread celebrity.

The sculpture career of Thomas Ball had begun in the early 1850's in Boston where he at first specialized in portrait busts and statuettes of famous men such as Daniel Webster.³ Like many aspiring young artists of his day he believed that one could only study art by going to Europe, and for a sculptor this meant to Italy, the fountainhead of inspiration since Roman antiquity and the Renaissance. Horatio Greenough, Ball's fellow Bostonian and the first American to declare sculpture his profession and study in Italy, had established the expatriate pattern in the late 1820's. It was in 1854 that Ball first went to Italy, where he thoroughly enjoyed the art-life for three years before returning to Boston where his major project was the bronze equestrian statue of George Washington which still stands in Boston's Public Gardens—one of the earliest and most successful equestrian statues to be produced by an American.

But then came the Civil War, and the heart and will of his beloved Boston was turned more to the great struggle than to patronage of a sculptor. So it was time to return to Italy, and it was on that journey in April of 1865 that he received the shocking news of Lincoln's assassination.

In Florence, the room in which he modelled the original 'Emancipation Group' was in the Casa Guidi where Ball

and his family occupied an apartment on the third floor. They had had difficulty finding accommodations just then, for King Victor Emmanuel had only recently established his court in the beautiful little city on the Arno. But the apartment was comfortable, and it was in the building where their good friends Robert and Elizabeth Browning had lived when the Balls had been in Florence several years before. Elizabeth had died in the meantime and Robert had returned to London, but the quarters still possessed their presence. Ball later recalled how devotees of the Brownings made pilgrimages to the Casa Guidi, as if visiting a shrine. One day on returning home he found a young English girl sitting at his own door, sobbing; the sculptor informed her that the Brownings had lived on the floor below, and noted with his usual wry humor, "poor thing! She had been weeping at the wrong door."⁴

Many of the Balls' friends of former years were then gone from Florence, but Hiram Powers and his family were still there and welcomed them as cordially as before. Powers—whose celebrated image of *The Greek Slave* had brought him international fame—would soon play a part in the story of Ball's group of Lincoln and the slave, to which we now return.

While waiting to take possession of his regular studio, Ball worked on the group in a room that was intended to be his little daughter's playroom. The motif, from the beginning, was to represent Lincoln in the act of his noblest deed as president—that of freeing the Blacks from their bondage. A single figure of the man—a solution later perfected by Daniel Chester French (at Lincoln, Nebraska) and Augustus Saint-Gaudens (at Chicago)—would not express what Thomas Ball wanted to convey of the heroic act of emancipation. This was a new concept in the design of a memorial image for America, all others previously consisting of the single-figure portrait statue, as in Richard Greenough's *Benjamin Franklin* (1855) in Boston or Hiram Powers' statue of *Daniel Webster* (1858) for the same city. At this point, Ball had not received a commission to make the piece. Commissions normally carried stipulations prescribed by the committee in charge; consequently, having no such restrictions, he was completely free to devise his own design and iconography. It was hoped, however, that some city or civic group in America would soon com-