ALLEGORICAL GROUP FOR THE NEW POST OFFICE

Designed by S. French, Quaint Corners in Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1883), 206.
A PETITION OF PHILADELPHIA ARTISTS

BY THOMAS B. BRUMBAUGH*

NINETEENTH-CENTURY American artists were faced with aesthetic and economic disadvantages as they sought to gain acceptance for their work at home and abroad. The snobbery of those American collectors and connoisseurs, who valued almost anything foreign over the best native achievements, is richly documented in the newspaper and magazine criticism of the time. A glance through acquisition catalogues made by the older art museums would suggest that art was strictly a European function. Throughout the century France and Germany held a monopoly on the best painters' brushes, pigments, and canvases, which were imported under prohibitive duties of thirty to forty percent. As for sculptors, the earlier neoclassic taste for statues carved in flawless white marble, and later for cast bronze, led them, with few exceptions, to work in Italy or Germany, where local assistants helped to fabricate duty-free "American" works.

It is not surprising that a petition of grievances would be drawn up in response to these conditions. One was addressed to the attention of the Honorable David McConaughy, then serving in Harrisburg as a member of the Pennsylvania State Senate. A prominent attorney and a veteran, he was active after the Civil War in organizing the Gettysburg Battlefield Memorial Association and served as its secretary. Evidently he was well acquainted with Frederick Rothermel, who was in the midst of work on his enormous painting, The Battle of Gettysburg, for the state Capitol.

Written out in the flowing autograph of the portrait painter, William K. Hewitt, the document from the author's collection is here transcribed exactly as to paragraphing, spelling, and punctuation:

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Philadelphia Feb 6th/68

To the Hon David McConaughy

Dear Sir:

Having been informed by Mr. Rothermel, that you are interested in the claims of American Artists, for a reconsideration and change of the revenue laws, so far as they retard the cultivation of native talents; the undersigned, including nearly all the professional Artists of Philadelphia, thankfully embracing the opportunity of your assistance, respectfully submit the following:

The necessity of the cultivation of the fine arts in every well ordered community, being already sufficiently established; the undersigned will endeavor, as briefly as possible, to direct your attention to those portions of the revenue law, which, in their opinion, are not only a great hindrance to the progress of art, but also grievously unjust to all who have devoted any serious portion of their time to its pursuit.

Probably from a confusion of ideas, or for the want of a proper opportunity for information on the subject, the framers of the present laws seem to have considered the importation of the works of foreign artists, the only method for the diffusion of taste; and in the furtherance of that idea, have so constructed the law that they shall be admitted at a low rate of duty; but, unfortunately, there has been no distinction of merit; all classes of works are allowed the same privilege; and the tax being ad valorem, while the works are difficult of appraisement; the opportunity is widely embraced by speculators to introduce them almost entirely free. In addition to this, for all the materials required in the pursuit of his profession, for which the artist is dependent upon foreign supply, he is compelled to pay a heavy duty, varying from thirty to forty per cent;¹ making it actually much cheaper to import anything claiming to be a work of art, than the necessary materials for creating it.

In presenting their claims for what they would consider a redress of their grievance, the undersigned would distinctively disclaim all hostility to anything

¹ The Morrill Tariff of 1861 (Statutes at Large, 47th Congress, 2nd Session) had demanded only twenty percent on artistic materials. A further ten to twenty percent increase, levied after the Civil War, was at issue here.
foreign, simply as such, confining their objections mainly to that class of works, which is manufactured at a small cost to the order of speculators, who flood our cities and towns with them, to no other advantage than profit to themselves.

To the well established Artist this may be thought, and perhaps is, no serious personal injury; but when it is considered that in art, as in letters, there must in every community be those in training, who are to rise and occupy the places of honor as they are vacated by time; that such training necessarily involves a large portion of life; that even with the successful Artist, there must be long years of labor and study, without adequate recompense, it will be easily perceived, that by thus occupying the market with valueless matter, at a price which the high cost of living places above competition, even with better work; the country not only withholds all inducements to the young Artist, but even enforces him to seek some more congenial clime, or to bury his talent in other pursuits.

The undersigned, then, deem themselves actuated by no unmanly purpose, when they ask for such legislation as shall allow them the same opportunity with the better class of foreign work, and protection from the worse; the only effectual method for accomplishing which, being, in their judgement, the imposition of a specific duty of fifty or more dollars upon every imported foreign work, great or small, better or worse: no system of ad valorem tax being able to secure the same discrimination between the desirable high cost work and the class condemned, and at the same time close the avenue to fraud by undervaluation.

They would further ask for an attentive reconsideration of the rates of duty imposed upon the necessary material for the practice of their profession, as shall determine the amount of relief in this respect, consistent with the public welfare; the precise adjustment of which, requires a more extended knowledge of the various interests of the country, than they are, at present, able to command.

In conclusion, they desire to express to you their high appreciation of the disinterested offer of your services, trusting they will meet with the reward due to all unselfish effort to advance any interest of our common country.

Very Respectfully—Your Obt. Servts—
Thomas Sully (1783-1872), a portrait painter who worked in Philadelphia after 1808.

Isaac L. Williams (1817-1895), a landscape and figure painter who was born in Philadelphia and began to exhibit there in 1837.

James Hamilton (1819-1878), a marine and landscape painter who was brought to Philadelphia from Ireland ca. 1834.

William H. Willcox (ca. 1831-?), a landscape painter who lived in Philadelphia after 1850.

John Moran (1831-?), a painter and photographer who was brought from England in 1844 and lived in Philadelphia after 1860.

Edmund Birckhead Bensell (1842-?), a painter who was probably a brother of G. F. Bensell.

Samuel Sartain (1830-1906), an engraver and painter; he was born in Philadelphia and began to exhibit there in 1848.

J. B. Wilson. It is likely that this is one of two J. Wilsons listed as artists in the 1860 census, but it may be evidence of the late activity of a J. B. Wilson, active in Charleston, S. C., earlier in the century.

Peter Frederick Rothermel (1817-1895), a historical and portrait painter and a director of the Pennsylvania Academy, 1847-1855.

Thomas Moran (1837-1926), a landscape painter, engraver, etc., who came from England in 1844 and lived in Philadelphia by ca. 1855.

John Faulkner, listed in Gopsill's 1868-69 Philadelphia City Directory as an artist, 740 Sansom, 1301 Arch (N.W. corner 13th and Arch).

Edward Moran (1829-1901), a marine and historical painter who came from England in 1844 and established himself as an artist in Philadelphia by 1857.

George Frederick Bensell (1837-1879), a portrait, genre, and historical painter who was born in Philadelphia and began to exhibit there in 1856.

John Sartain (1808-1897), an engraver, portrait and miniature painter who was born in England and emigrated to Philadelphia.

William Keeseay Hewitt (1817-1893), a portrait and crayon artist who was born in Philadelphia and lived there after 1843.

Jonathan K. Trego (1817-ca.1868), a portrait, genre, and animal painter who lived in Philadelphia at various times after 1852.

Daniel Ridgway Knight (1840-1924), a genre and figure painter who
PETITION OF PHILADELPHIA ARTISTS

The text claims that "nearly all the professional Artists of Philadelphia" signed the petition, but a search through a number of city directories and various reference works on American art shows that this petition represents less than one-half of the city's artistic census. One suspects that, as with most petitions, many of the appended signatures are those which were accidentally or most conveniently obtained. Three of the four Moran brothers are here, while only two of the Sartains are present. At least two of the signers, Richard Norris Brooke and Augustus G. Heaton, were students, for whom a special plea is made, while the eighty-six-year-old Thomas Sully, whose name leads all the rest, was the grand old man on the Philadelphia art scene.

Modesty or prejudice may have prevented such marginal categories as commercial lithographers, plaster molders, ship carvers, and women from being represented. At least two of Sully's daughters, then living in Philadelphia, might be described as professional artists, and Emily Sartain was presumably working as seriously as her other brothers, Henry and William (neither of whom signed), in their father's studio. The signature of only one bona fide sculptor, Albert E. Harnisch, would indicate that there were indeed very few sculptors not then working abroad.

was born in Philadelphia and began to exhibit there in 1858. Much of his career was spent in France.

T. Henry Smith (1832?-?), an engraver who was born in Philadelphia.

Richard Norris Brooke (1847-1920), a genre and figure painter who was a student at the Pennsylvania Academy in 1868.

Frederick B. Schell (ca.1838-?), a painter, born in Philadelphia, and active in the 1860s and 1870s.

Thomas J. Fenimore is listed in the Philadelphia City Directories as an artist who lived from 1865-1873 at 1531 Ridge Ave. In 1868 his business address was 704 Walnut St. In 1872 Sarah H., the widow of Joseph, was also at 1531 Ridge Ave.

William Van de Velde Bonfield, a landscape painter who exhibited in Philadelphia between 1861 and 1869.

William Emlen Cresson, listed in Gopsill's 1868-69 Directory as an artist who resided at 922 Chestnut and 1029 Spruce St.

Albert E. Harnisch (1843-?), a sculptor who was born in Philadelphia and exhibited there between 1859 and 1869.

Edmund Darch Lewis (1835-1910), a landscape painter and collector who was born in Philadelphia and began to exhibit there in 1854.

Robert M. Tudor, a portrait painter who worked in Philadelphia between 1858 and 1869.

Augustus G. Heaton (1844-1930), a portrait and historical painter who was born in Philadelphia and became a student of Rothermel at the Pennsylvania Academy.
and, of course, by implication the petition was chiefly concerned with the problems of painters.

In any case, documents, such as the one presented above, brought pressure toward increasing tariffs on foreign art, which eventually reached a high point of thirty percent in 1883.\textsuperscript{31} Apparently the Morrill Tariff of 1861 exacted only ten percent of stated prices on imported paintings and sculpture and made no attempt whatsoever to differentiate between good and bad works. Valuations for customs purposes must often have been very casual, if not fraudulent, and thus the Philadelphians asked that a specific duty of fifty dollars or more be put on "every imported work, great or small, better or worse." As a result, it was expected that the furniture and picture dealers, catering to fledgling artistic interests in this country, would no longer find it profitable to import cheap, often mass-produced wares, at the expense of local artists who depended upon costly imported materials.

As a postscript to this document, it is interesting to note that scarcely a decade later, a reversal in the tastes of Americans had occurred, and artists at home were successfully competing with Europeans. William Wetmore Story, one of the most distinguished European-based American sculptors of the century, wrote an indignant letter to a New York banker, John A. C. Gray,\textsuperscript{32} in which he summed up the situation as it had developed by July 14, 1884:

\begin{quote}
If in consequence of our disastrous tariff of 30 per cent on foreign works of art—the Italian government should, as it threatens, and is I confess justified in threatening, lay a retaliatory duty of 30 percent on the exportation of American works of art—it would as you see, at once raise the expenses of a statue by nearly one half? You can scarcely imagine the bitter feeling that this tax has raised throughout Europe—in France, Germany and Italy. The governments abroad give us any facility of study, and equal rights of exposition and prizes with their own artists, and we in return lay a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} Tariff of 1883 (\textit{Statutes at Large, 47th Congress, 2nd Session}).

\textsuperscript{32} This unpublished letter was recently in the New York autograph market. Since most American marble sculpture (from funeral monuments to parlor statuettes) was carved in Italy, Story was especially concerned that such a duty would reduce the earnings of sculptors there.
duty of 30 per cent on their works. It is outrageous—
contrary to the interests not only of artists both abroad
and at home, but to the interests of art generally and of
the public. I don’t know in fact who is benefitted unless
the Buncombe Politicians.

On June 15, 1885, Story drew up a “Petition of Roman-Ameri-
can Artists,” addressed to Congress, urging that “there should
be a free field, and no favor for Americans.” He seems to have
expressed the general opinion of artists at home and abroad,
when he argued that foreign art should be welcomed “with
outstretched arms” for the spiritual well-being of the nation.
More practically he noted that “art ramifies everywhere into
industry. It opens a field for labor in a hundred directions. It
finds its way into manufactures, and tissues, and designs . . .
to glorify the commonest products of our industry . . . by the
element of beauty.” The thirty signers included a number of
well-known artists and a few nonentities, as one might expect,
but also included Albert E. Harnisch, who now reversed his posi-
tion less than twenty years after he had signed the 1868 Phila-
delphia petition. Tariffs on imported-art materials were to fluctu-
ate considerably over the years and generally remained high,
but the McKinley Tariff of 1890 reduced the duty on foreign
art to fifteen percent. It was increasingly clear that the earlier
defensive postures, the disclaiming of “unmanly purpose” or
“hostility to anything foreign,” were forgotten, for American art
and artists had come of age.

William Wetmore Story, Reminiscences of William Wetmore Story (Bos-
ton, 1897), 233-238.