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RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

# Plaster and Process – The Studio of Edward V. Valentine

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Plaster sculptures appeared in nineteenth-century homes, studios, museums, and schools, and their use and reception varied in each of these contexts. My dissertation considers the works of two American artists, both of whom worked with and displayed plasters in their studios, and had close ties to the museums displaying plasters to a wider public. To illuminate the roles and uses of plaster in the sculptor's studio, I examine the studio of Richmond-based sculptor Edward Valentine (Fig. 1). The plaster cast collection of the Valentine Museum (founded by Edward's brother) will be examined in order to understand plaster's function within the public museum. By closely analyzing Valentine's correspondence, works, and related documents (such as contracts with clients or foundries), I reveal not only the role of plaster in his process, but also the professional ecosystem that existed to support and create his work. In turn, this case study tells us about the use of plaster and the practices of plaster-modelers in the period more broadly. My research thus far has revealed professional ties to other sculptors and plaster-modelers in both Richmond, Virginia and New York City.

I also consider how Valentine, his clients, and visitors to his studio felt about the use of plaster aesthetically through anecdotal evidence, personal correspondence, and newspaper articles. How did viewers approach plaster objects in the artist's studio? What can their impressions tell us about larger sociocultural and political trends or beliefs? One example of the outcome of such inquiry comes from the chapter I am currently writing, a section on Valentine's series of plaster sculptures of African Americans – *The Nation's Ward*, *Knowledge is Power*, and *Uncle Henry* (*Ancien Regime*) – a challenging subset of his oeuvre (Figs. 2, 3, and 4, ). All three works reveal not only Valentine's own personal racist sentiments, but also the pervasive racism and bigotry of the era, evidenced in the sculptural narrative and formal qualities of each piece.

Race as a concept underwent profound development during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the most pernicious attempts to establish a racial hierarchy came from the measurement and comparison of crania, particularly the work of Pieter Camper.[1] Diagrammatic charts published alongside his lectures seemingly presented a hierarchy of mankind from ape to Apollo, with the European next to the Greek god, and the African next to the ape (Fig. 5). That the *Apollo Belvedere* was chosen to represent the highest visual ideal is significant. In his *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (1755), Winckelmann argued that Classical sculpture should serve as a model for modern artists, especially in learning to capture the ideal – the emotional, intellectual essence and perfected physical form of a subject – devoting a particularly effusive passage to the *Apollo Belvedere*.[2] Despite the fact that there was early evidence for the use of polychromy by the Greeks and Romans, whiteness remained an

[1] Thomas F. Gossett, *Race: The History of an Idea in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, first printed in 1963, reprinted in 1997), 69 and David Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 201.
[2] Interestingly, Camper refers to Johann Joachim Winckelmann frequently in his introduction (Bindman, *Ape to Apollo*, 206).

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important aspect of Winckelmann's ideal and it was about more than just sculpture's emphasis on form.[3] That plaster is inherently a white medium cannot be overlooked and its whiteness in conjunction with its use to reproduce the classical sculptural canon, a canon now closely linked to Europeans, reinforces the linkage of white racial superiority to the classical tradition privileged Euro-American institutions of arts and education.

Valentine's first work cast in plaster was a copy of the bust of the *Apollo Belvedere* in his father's home, itself a reproduction. In copying from this sculpture, Valentine became part of a larger Euro-American academic tradition that privileged Classical statuary. Furthermore, owning and displaying such a copy was meant to exemplify his perceived social, racial, and intellectual superiority from which his elite status as a member of Richmond's high society was derived. As a result, Valentine kept it in his studio for the rest of his life. Thus, this copy and his three sculptures of African Americans would have been in visual dialogue in his studio, reproducing in three dimensions Camper's damning diagrammatic chart.

While the depressed economic climate in the South immediately after the Civil War kept the commissioning of monumental marble or bronze public sculpture at bay, it did support the production of portrait busts and figurative sculpture cast in plaster and sold commercially. Plaster's whiteness demanded that the subjects' blackness be made visible in other ways (or doubly visible when painted). The half-length bust of *The Nation's Ward* depicts a young African American boy wearing worn clothing and a military cap, part of a Civil War uniform.[4] When visiting Valentine's studio, two ladies visiting from the North viewed the piece and one "said what a pretty name and sentiment it was, but on conversing with a Southern gentleman found it was meant as a satire."[5] Valentine has relied upon the use of stereotypical features "such as thick protruding lips, flared nostrils, and kinky hair" to identify this figure as a person of black African descent.[6] This work is an example of a racist caricature, the picaninny, extremely popular at the time and for most of this country's history.[7] By drawing upon the character of the picaninny, Valentine is reinforcing the stereotype of African Americans as lazy, often portrayed in cartoons of the era as comical in their indolence and ignorance. He seems to be making a cruel joke at their expense, masked as "good humor," ridiculing what he and others perceived as their misguided reliance on the Federal government in the postwar era. It was Valentine's bigoted and bitter answer to the national debates over the work ethic of and economic opportunities for the nation's recently freed African American men and women, amusing only to other bigoted elite white viewers. Plaster's versatility and affordability allowed for the replication of imagery, from the Classical ideal to the modern caricature, and all its attendant ideologies, from the implicitly to explicitly racist.

[3] For Winckelmann's mention of a painted marble figure, see Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, trans. Henry Lodge (Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1872), 148. Examples for evidence of polychromy at this time also come from reports of the practice in Stuart and Revett's *The Antiquities of Athens*, as well as Quatremère de Quincy's research on antique polychromy (see Blühm 1996 and Honour 1972).
[4] Charity S. Calvin, "Civil War Uniforms," in *Clothing and Fashion: American Fashion from Head to Toe*, vol. 2, eds. José F. Blanco et. al. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016). Over 100 units in both the North and South wore this cap evoking the kepi, or forage cap, which was inspired by the zouave uniform, originally from Algeria and later adopted by the French.
[5] Elizabeth Gray Valentine, *Dawn to Twilight: Work of Edward V. Valentine* (Richmond, VA: The William Byrd Press, Inc., 1929), 94.
[6] David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Preface," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art: From the American Revolution to World War I: Slaves and Liberators*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Cambridge; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), xiv.
[7] David Pilgrim, "The Picaninny Caricature," last modified 2012. https://ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack/picaninny/homepage.htm

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Figure 1. Interior of Edward V. Valentine's Studio (showing Uncle Henry on left), Cook Collection, The Valentine, Richmond, VA.


Figure 2. Edward V. Valentine, *The Nation's Ward*, 1868, plaster, The Valentine, Richmond, VA.

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Figure 3. Edward V. Valentine, *Knowledge is Power*, 1868, painted plaster, The Valentine, Richmond, VA.


Figure 4. Edward V. Valentine, *Uncle Henry (Ancien Régime)*, 1873-74, painted plaster, The Valentine, Richmond, VA.

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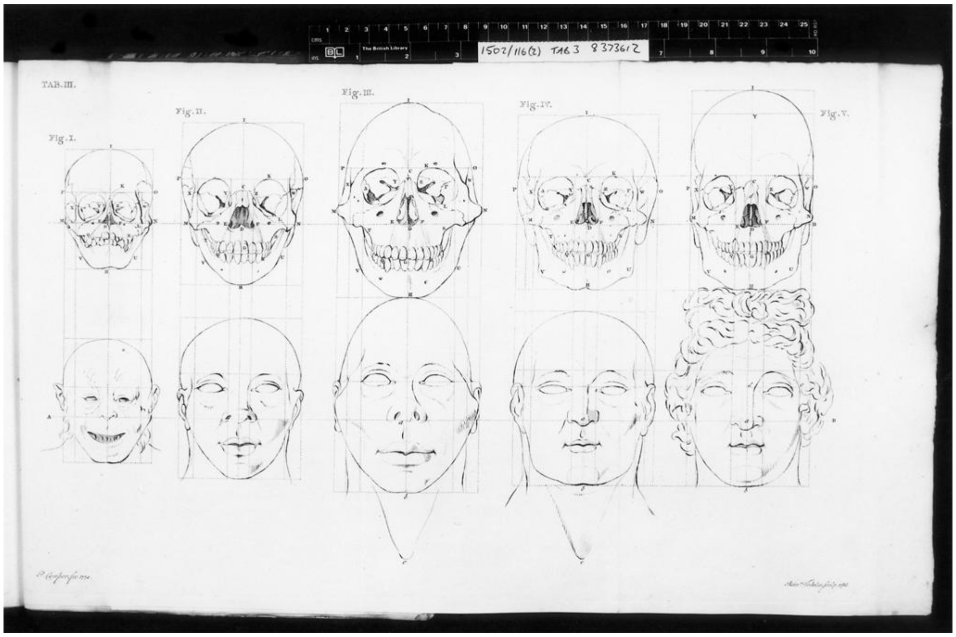

Figure 5. Reinier Vinkeles after Petrus Camper, Print Illustration for Petrus Camper, Verhandeling van Petrus Camper over her natuurlijk verschil der Wesentrekken im Menschen (Utrecht, 1791), figures representing skulls and heads of monkeys and men, seen full front, 1786, engraving on copper, ca. 10 x 18 inches, The Image of the Black in Western Art Research Project and Photo Archive, W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, Harvard University (photograph accessed from ARTstor).