Smithsonian American Art Museum

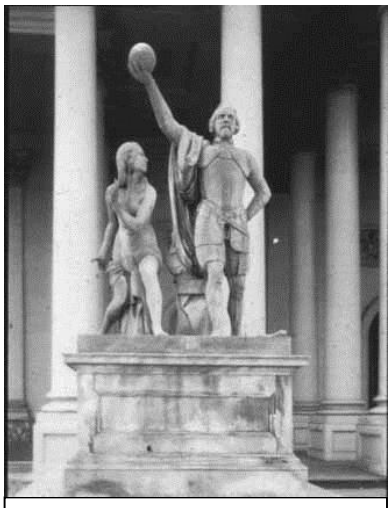
The Portrayal of the American Indian in American Culture

The way in which American Indians were portrayed in art and literature by artists and writers of the nineteenth-century largely reflected how they were perceived in relation to the American idea of **manifest destiny**. The white American population viewed the Indian in one of two ways. In the more sympathetic view, the figure of the American Indian signified the sad and inevitable, yet perceived as necessary, loss of the native population as a result of the white colonization and expansion. Once the Indian no longer posed a threat to the white population, their demise could be lamented and mourned and consequently they would be remembered as 'noble savages.' Scholar Renato Rosaldo has coined this viewpoint, "imperialist nostalgia." Another interpretation of the Indian's inclusion in art and literature is decidedly less romantic; the inclusion of the Indian was meant to show the percieved natural superiority of the white over the native, essentially communicating the message of white civilization triumphing over Indian "savagery." During the time sculptor Ferdinand Pettrich was actively working in America, beginning in 1835, this second viewpoint seems to have been largely perpetuated by the United States Government through artistic commissions that reflected policies regarding the American Indian.

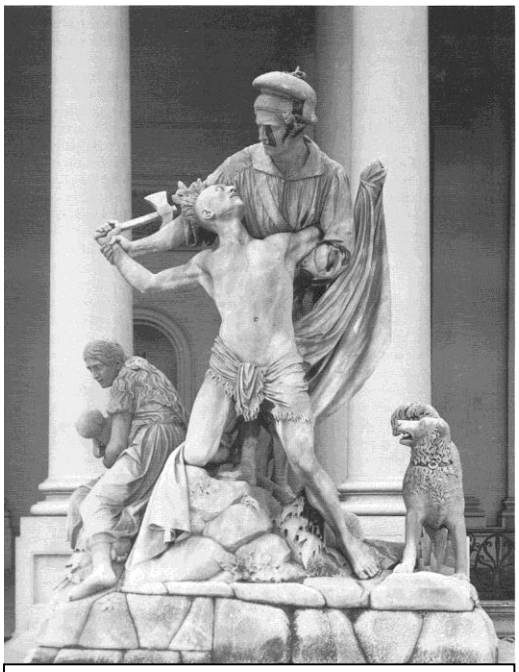
In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed into law the **Indian Removal Act** which authorized him to grant unsettled lands west of the Mississippi River to American Indians in exchange for their land that fell within existing state borders. Many tribes went peacefully, but others like the Cherokees resisted and in 1838 and 1839 they were forcibly removed from their lands. Their march west became known as the **Trail of Tears**, where as many as 4,000 Cherokees died from starvation and disease. This governmental act was yet another blow to the American Indian population, as it reminded the public of the seemingly necessary push of the Indian population west for the 'greater good' of westward expansion.

During the War of 1812, the Capitol was partially burned and destroyed by the British. Reconstruction on the building began in 1815 after the close of the war and lasted well into the 1820's. In the following two decades, the United States government would commission sculptures to adorn the newly rebuilt Capitol. These highly paid commissions were sought after by artists from around the world, some of which Pettrich competed for but ultimately lost. These Capitol sculptures were, however, not strictly meant for aesthetics but served to push an agenda; they functioned as visual political propaganda to support United States policy regarding the American Indian. It could be argued that these government commissions largely influenced the public and its opinions on American Indians.

Two sculptures that were commissioned by the government in 1837 that support this theory are Italian sculptor Luigi Persico's *Discovery* and American sculptor Horatio Greenough's *Rescue*. These sculptures once flanked the eastern staircase to the Capitol, but have since been retired to storage. *Discovery* portrays Christopher Columbus in a triumphant pose holding a globe in his outstretched hand. An Indian woman recoils at the sight of him and recedes to the rear of the sculpture. Art historian Vivien Green Fryd's interpretation of the sculpture is that it is proclaiming "the dominance of the white man over the effeminate and, by implication, weak and vulnerable Indian. As the newcomer advances onto the soil of the New World, the native begins her retreat in the face of his power and superiority." In Greenough's *Rescue*, a male Indian is shown attacking a white woman and child. He is apprehended by a much larger and stronger white man; "the two figures now form a single unit, suggesting not assimilation but subjugation in the interlocked relation between pioneer and warrior. As in the left staircase group, the explorer dominates, not only because of his towering size and physique but also because of his advantage in strength over the powerless Indian."



Discovery of America, 1837-50, Luigi Persico, Image courtesy of U.S. Capitol Historical Society



The Rescue, 1837-50, Horatio Greenough, Image courtesy of U.S. Capitol Historical Society

Artists hoping for highly paid government commissions would have had to reflect the government's policy on American Indians. If their depiction of the Indian did not support policy and/or mainstream views on westward expansion, they would not have received government sponsored commissions. It is for this reason that Pettrich's sculpture of Tecumseh might not have been purchased by the government if it was viewed as exemplifying the 'noble savage' rather than as a representation of the declining Indian population. It might partially explain why the sculpture of Tecumseh was relegated to the depths of the crypt below the Capitol rotunda until it was moved to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1878.

In Pettrich's *Tecumseh*, there is one compositional element in particular which serves to symbolize the decline and eventual death of the Indian race: the cut tree stump on which Tecumseh leans. The juxtaposition of the dying or lamenting Indian with a tree stump was a recognized visual tradition in both American art and literature during the nineteenth-century. In John Augustus Stone's play ***Metamora, or the Last of the Wampanoags***, the title character laments, "O my people . . . the race of the red man has fallen away like trees of the forest before the axes of the palefaces." Here, the tree stump highlights the common fate between the Indian population and nature. An 1855 review of the play explicitly connects the tree stump to the fate of the Indian: "His tribe has disappeared, he is left alone, the solitary off-shoot of a mighty race; like the tree-stump beside him he is old and withered, already the axe of the blackwoodsman disturbs his last hours; civilization and Art, and agriculture . . . have desecrated his home. Both nature and the Indian must be overpowered for white civilization's unimpeded growth."

Glossary

Indian Removal Act: (1830) passed by Congress during President Andrew Jackson's administration, the law authorized the president to grant unsettled lands west of the Mississippi River to American Indians in exchange for their ancestral homelands, which were within the existing borders of the United States.

manifest destiny: the nineteenth-century doctrine or belief that the expansion of the U.S. throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable.

Metamora, or the Last of the Wampanoags: (1829) written by John Augustus Stone, the play follows the title character Metamora, a heroic and noble American Indian chief, and his tragic fall at the hand of English settlers in seventeenth century New England.

Trail of Tears: (1838-39) the forcible removal of several Indian tribes (namely, Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole, and Chickasaw) from their homeland to reservations west of the Mississippi River by the United States government, following the enactment of the Indian Removal Act.