Summary Information

Repository
Albany Institute of History & Art Library

Creator
Erastus Dow Palmer

Title
Erastus Dow Palmer Papers, 1846-1955

Identifier
AQ 185

Date
1846-1955

Physical Description
1.1 linear feet; 3 boxes

Physical Location
The materials are located onsite in the Museum.

Language of the Material
English

Abstract
Erastus Dow Palmer (1817-1904) was an American sculptor. Born in Pompey, New York, he and his family moved to Albany, New York, in 1849 when Palmer began working on large-scale sculptures. His sculpture, *Angel at the Sepulchre* (1865), remains in Albany. Palmer son’s Walter Launt Palmer (1854-1932), also became an artist, best known for his winter scenes. Following his death in 1904, Erastus Palmer was buried in the Albany Rural Cemetery.

This collection contains correspondence, personal papers, and photographs.
**Preferred Citation**

Preferred citation for this material is as follows:


**Conditions Governing Access and Use**

**Restrictions on Access**

None

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**Immediate Source of Acquisition**


**Processing Information**


**Biographical/Historical**

Erastus Dow Palmer was born April 2, 1817, in Pompey, Onondaga County, New York. As a youth, he moved with his family to Utica, New York, where his father, a carpenter, taught him the basics of woodworking. In 1834, Palmer moved to Dunkirk, New York, to start a career in woodcarving and joining. While in Dunkirk, he was married to Malinda Alton. By 1840 Palmer had returned to Utica, having lost his wife and their baby to complications of childbirth. Within three years Palmer again married, to Mary Jane Seaman.

1846 marked a turning point in Palmer's life and ultimately in his career. The story has been related that a neighbor showed him a cameo portrait imported from Europe. Palmer, impressed by the delicacy of the carving, was determined to try his hand at the medium. His first
undertaking was a portrait of his wife Mary Jane. When it was finished Palmer showed it to a friend, who in turn showed it to a local lawyer, Thomas R. Walker. The cameo was praised by Walker and, in gratitude, Palmer executed a portrait of Walker, thus beginning his career as a sculptor.

The late 1840s art scene in America and Europe was dominated by neoclassicism, a style whose influence became clearly evident in Palmer's work. His first idealized subject was Virginia, a shell cameo whose subject was taken from a popular novel. The following year Palmer carved his first full-length sculpture, The Mariner's Wife. Palmer's work often blends classical tradition with inspiration from his personal life. This idea is clearly evident in works such as Infant Ceres, where his daughter served as a model; that bust was carved in a realistic fashion and then given an allegorical title.

In 1849 Palmer and his wife moved to Albany, New York, presumably in search of patronage in both public and private spheres. In the 1850's Palmer opened a studio near the State Capitol building, and it soon became a center of artistic activity. Palmer's success in Albany allowed him to take on a number of assistants, including sculptors Richard Henry Parks and Charles Calverley, which in turn granted him the freedom to acquire more commissions and, ultimately, to reach a wider audience.

However, while Palmer reached artistic maturity during the 1850s, his career would be stunted by the onset of the Civil War. While the conflict itself inspired one of Palmer's most celebrated works, Peace in Bondage, Palmer's overall patronage declined markedly during and after the war. Furthermore, he created only two works between 1867 and 1872, one of which, Angel of the Sepulchre, was commissioned by Robert Lenox Banks for his family lot in Albany Rural Cemetery.

In 1873, Palmer was commissioned by New York State to execute a full-length statue of statesman Robert R. Livingston. In preparation for the Livingston commission Palmer made a trip to Europe, which was, in fact, his first trip abroad. The excursion also included two young painters: his son Walter Launt Palmer and Walter's childhood friend Will Hicok Low. After touring, Palmer rented a studio in Paris where he modeled the figure of Livingston. The piece was cast in bronze later the following year by the Barbedienne foundry and eventually shipped to America. Palmer had two other copies cast in bronze. One was presented to at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., while the other remained in Albany at the State Court of Appeals. A plaster version of the statue is also located at the Albany Institute of History and Art.

By this time Palmer was nearly seventy years old and, in addition to aging, the AQ 185 3 neoclassical style for which he was so well known was falling out of fashion on both sides of the Atlantic. Classic idealization was replaced by a more active realism, marble (Palmer's medium of choice) was replaced increasingly by bronze, and Palmer and his contemporaries were superseded by a new generation of artists. However, it should not be thought that Palmer left no artistic legacy. During his lifetime, much was made of the point that, unlike other sculptors of his generation and those succeeding him, Palmer did not go to Europe to study and work. The result was that his style developed in a particularly America manner. At the time it was thought that staying at home left his art pure and uncorrupted by the influences of Europe.
Erastus Dow Palmer died in Albany on March 9, 1904; he was buried in Albany Rural Cemetery. Palmer was survived by his widow Mary Jane Seaman Palmer, his son Walter Launt Palmer, and his four daughters, Isabelle (Mrs. W.H. Fassette) of London, England, Fanny (Mrs. Joseph Gavit) of New York City, Rebecca (Mrs. Frank Burton) of New York City, and Madeleine (Mrs. Clive Jaffray) of Minneapolis, Minnesota.

**Scope and Contents**

The Erastus Dow Palmer Collection spans the period from 1846-1959 and primarily contains documents relating to the sculptor's personal and family life. The collection is arranged in three series: Correspondence; Personal Papers; and Photographs. The majority of the items in this collection were donated to the Institute by Palmer's grandson Joseph Gavit in January 1966. Over the course of time other E.D. Palmer-related items have found their way into the collection. One such group was the 1977 purchase of some sixty-three letters to or from Palmer.

Series I. CORRESPONDENCE spans the years 1848-1923 and occupies fifty-five folders. The largest of the three series, it has been further divided into four subseries: Outgoing Correspondence; Incoming Correspondence; Miscellaneous; and Walter Launt Palmer Letters. The subseries Incoming Correspondence is arranged in five groups: letters from Frederic E. Church; letters from J.Q.A. Ward; letters regarding E.D. Palmer's Brochure Philosophy of the Ideal; letters regarding Palmer's Livingston Statue; and General Correspondence. Correspondence is filed alphabetically by sender within. Similarly, all other subseries are arranged alphabetically with the exception of Miscellaneous which has been arranged by typology and or content.

Series II. PERSONAL PAPERS spans the years 1846-1955, and holds seven folders. This series has been further divided into three subseries; Biographical Material; Studio Records; and Miscellaneous.

Series III. PHOTOGRAPHS spans the years 1858-1890, and occupies seven folders. The AQ 185 5 series has been further arranged in two subseries: Photograph's of Palmer's Work; and Family and Personal Photographs. In addition to this collection other images of E.D. Palmer and his family can be found in the Mary Palmer Calverley Byrne-Ivy Papers (C 500).

**Contents List**

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Incoming Correspondence, 1850-1903

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<td>Caroline H. Gibson</td>
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