

February OOM - Beth Karon
The Algerian
Charles-Henri-Joseph Cordier
(aka Charles Henri Joseph Cordier)
Acquisition # 76.3
G357

Medium: Sculpture in silvered bronze, Algerian jasper, porphyry
Creation place and culture: France
Style: 19th Century
Date of Sculpture: c. 1850-57



Charles-Henri-Joseph Cordier (1827-1905) was a French sculptor, considered the leading Ethnographic Sculptor in 19th Century France. He trained at the Petite Ecole in Paris with Francois Rude, and was inspired by the taste for the "orient" that Delacroix had done so much to communicate to a whole generation of artists.

Ethnography is a historical science that studies ethnic groups and other ethnic formations and their material and spiritual culture. However, he wrote of his depiction of ethnographic types that his was not a strict scientific treatment, but rather the creation of "a general type combining all the beauties specific to race under study."

His work was admired by critics and other artists during the 19th Century but he often had to defend the subjects of his sculptures and the materials he used in the creation of his artwork. As a result, his work fell out of favor and into obscurity during the 20th Century.

In 1847, Cordier met Seid Enkess, a former black slave who had become a model. He was sympathetic to the abolitionist movement and believed in the beauty and equality of all races. This meeting would prove to determine the course of his career.

In his unpublished memoirs, the artist cites the law of April 27, 1948, that abolished slavery in France and its colonies: "My art incorporated the reality of a whole new

subject, the revolt against slavery and the birth of anthropology." In pioneering ethnography as a subject for sculpture in the nineteenth century, Cordier aimed to illustrate what he described as "the idea of the universality of beauty." His busts often paired couples of the opposite sex of the same race.



His first success was the plaster bust of *Said Abdullah of Mayac, Kingdom of the Darfur*, exhibited at his first exhibit at the 1848 Paris Salon, the same year that slavery was abolished in France and all French colonies. With this work, he achieved success when he was ordered to do a bronze version for the French government.

Sculpted images of African men and women were rarely shown in public galleries until Cordier's bust of Said Abdullah. This bust also reflects the new European fascination of the time with non-Western physiognomy, costumes and customs - later termed "Orientalism."



African Venus was created in bronze in 1851, and bought by Queen Victoria at the Great Exhibition of London of that same year. This made official recognition and approval of the new exotic sculpture, as opposed to the more recent practice of art drawn from antique examples.

This was created as a companion piece to his earlier work of Said Abdullah.

Both busts became popular after France abolished slavery, and were also respected works of art in the 19th Century. They came to represent expressions of human pride and dignity in the face of grave injustice. These were the first of fifteen busts created for the French state, and were powerful expressions of nobility and dignity purchased by dignitaries and the likes of the Museum of Natural History in France.

From 1851 to 1866, Cordier was the official ethnographic sculptor of Museum of Natural History in Paris, creating a series of beautiful and spectacularly lifelike busts for the museum's new ethnographic gallery. In 1856, he was awarded a commission from the French government to visit Algeria with the purpose of studying and reproducing in sculpture "the different indigenous types of the human race." On this trip, he also

discovered onyx deposits in the country's recently rediscovered and reopened ancient quarries and began to use the stone in busts.

When he returned from Algeria, he began work on a series of busts commissioned for the new ethnographic gallery of the Museum of Natural History researching these themes as well as the technique of combining materials such as bronze with colored stones. He ingeniously fitted enameled bronze heads into the vibrantly patterned stone, creating exciting - though costly - representations of Africans that appealed to the highest levels of European society. They were exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1857, made of mixed onyx, marble and bronze. They represented specific racial types in North African costumes, including a silvered bronze and onyx version of *A Sudanese in Algerian Costume*, purchased by Emperor Napoléon III. The figure's carefully rendered drapery and noble features, described by one writer as having "the air of a Roman emperor," made this North African subject one of Cordier's most successful.

He went on a number of other government-sponsored missions, including Greece in 1858-59, where he found red and ochre-colored marbles from quarries in Greece; and Egypt in 1865. These travels led him to envision a series of modern ethnic types intended to rival those of antiquity. In these pieces, Cordier was able to combine his academic training with his passion for exotic subjects and equally exotic richly colored materials. Thus, his work made an important contribution to the 19th century revival of polychrome sculpture. This period taste for polychromy in sculpture was an international phenomenon sparked by artistic debates about the painting of ancient statuary and inspired by ancient Roman and Renaissance sculpture composed of variously colored marbles.

Many of his busts were clearly described by him as portraits of individuals met during his missions, and some representing historical figures, such as a heroine of Greek Independence, governor of Algiers, or a famous explorer of the time.



In MIA's *The Algerian*, Cordier excelled in the precise rendering of facial features and embellishments - the scarification on his cheeks, for example - as well as specific dress of different ethnic groups. His portraits show a precision and honesty which was virtually unknown before, without any elements of stereotyping and caricature. His particular interest was for the peoples he encountered during his travels in North Africa. Cordier's use of onyx marble - which was quarried only in Algeria - for the ethnic dress of the Algerian demonstrates that even in his choice of materials he sought to pay homage to the specific culture of his sitters.

Bibliography -

ArtsConnectEd

Several websites - including the Walters Museum (Baltimore) and Musee d'Orsay (Paris) where multiple of his pieces are found.

Interestingly, there is an absence of information on Cordier in my standard art history college texts, and even in ancillary books from my college days such as a four-volume set on artist biographies - consistent with the obscurity of this artist in the 20th century mentioned above.

Tours -

Off The Wall

Artists' Choices

Influences in art

Social-Action based tours

Any Ethnic-based tours

Art since 1850

Artists' Techniques

Materials used

Questions -

1. How would you describe this person? His mood? His social status?
2. If he could speak, what would he sound like? What would he say?
3. Compare this piece with a monochromatic bronze or marble? What differences do color and/or lack of multiple colors make to you?