

REMARKS, APRIL 28, 1836,

On Statuary for the Capitol (1)

Mr. Buchanan moved that the resolution directing the Committee on Finance to inquire into the expediency of contracting with Luigi Persico for two groups of statues to complete the ornaments of the east front of the Capitol, be taken up for consideration.

(Mr. Preston, of South Carolina, suggested that the whole matter be left to the President, whom the resolution authorized to make the contract; and also that Mr. Greenough, a native artist and a man of unquestioned genius, who was about to return to the country, should be employed.

Mr. Mangrum thought the inquiry should be made by the Committee on the Library.

Mr. Calhoun observed that the government had but little patronage of this kind, and thought it would be reserved for native artists.)

Mr. Buchanan did not intend at that time to enter into a discussion of the question raised by the Senator from South Carolina (Mr. Calhoun,) though on a proper occasion he should have something to say with regard to it. He would assure the junior Senator from South Carolina, (Mr. Preston,) that if he had had the selection of an individual in the Senate, whose judgment and taste in matters relating to the fine arts qualified him to decide as to the merits of the proposed pieces of statuary, he would have selected him; but he knew that a bill had come there from the House of Representatives, containing appropriations for statuary which had been referred to the Committee on Finance, he had, therefore, no choice but to send his resolution to that committee, or incur the risk of its not being acted on during this session.

(1) Cong. Globe, 24 Cong. 1 Sess. III. 406-407; Register of Debates, 24 Cong. 1 Sess. XII., part 2, pp. 1313-1314; 1313-1315, 1315-1317.

(Mr. Mangum here renewed his suggestion that the matter should be referred to the Library Committee while Mr. Preston repeated his previous views.)

Mr. Buchanan said he did not anticipate so much discussion on a mere question of inquiry. Some years ago I (said Mr. B.) submitted a similar resolution to the House of Representatives, and I thought I could not do wrong in asking a committee of the Senate to inquire into the expediency of making an appropriation.

I feel it to be my duty, however, after what has taken place, to reply to some of the remarks which have fallen from the Senators from South Carolina, particularly those of the junior member.



No man living, sir, is willing to extend more encouragement to naïve talent than I am. Wherever it can fairly be brought into competition with that of foreign growth it ought to be preferred. I am no connoisseur in sculpture, but I know that it requires immense labor, intimate knowledge of drawing, and years of experience, to execute a classical, or historical figure.

There is as much difference between the artist who forms a bust, and he who executes a group of statuary, as there is between a mere portrait painter and a Michael Angelo. It is the very lowest grade of the art—the commencement of the study of the profession. No gentleman, whatever may be his natural genius, who as proceeded no further than the execution of a bust, and the taking of a striking likeness, is fit to be employed in ornamenting the eastern front of our Capitol.

It may be asked, (and I answer the question now,) why I feel this interest in Mr. Persico? It is from the motives of private friendship, in consistence with the public good. He came to the town in which I reside in 1819, merely as a portrait painter, and for the purpose of acquiring a knowledge of the English language.

His genius and taste were soon discovered, and in his society I have passed many agreeable and instructive hours. He left us without a single enemy. He is not a native, but he intends to spend his days among us, for he loves liberty with all the enthusiasm of genius. He is devoted to the institutions of this country.

When I next saw him, it was in New York, where his talents as a sculptor had begun to attract much attention. I asked him why he had concealed his knowledge of sculpture to his friends in Lancaster, and he replied, evincing the modesty which always accompanies true merit, that there were so many foreigners in this country who pretended to what they were not entitled, that he had determined not to speak of his knowledge of this art until he should have had an opportunity of displaying it my his works. He was subsequently employed by this Government at a salary of \$1,500 a year to ornament the tympanum of the eastern front of the Capitol. How he succeeded, let the universal approbation which his efforts have received, decide.

After he had completed this work, I presented a resolution to the House of Representatives, of which I was then a member, similar to the one I have now offered. He was employed; and though I pretend to no taste in the fine arts, yet I know that others, who are competent judges, as well as myself, have been delighted with the results of his labors, and admired the industry and genius with which they were accomplished.

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The hope of identifying his talents with the Capitol of the Union has been the subject of his thoughts by day and his dreams by night. Most keenly and deeply, therefore, would he feel, if the Senate of the United States should refuse to entertain a mere resolution of inquiry.

Any one [sic] whether a man of taste or not, cannot but be struck with the model of one of the groups which he has completed. It represents the great discoverer when he first bounded with ecstasy upon the shore; all his toils and perils past, presenting a hemisphere to the astonished world, with the name of America inscribed upon it. Whilst he is thus standing upon the shore, a female savage, with awe and wonder depicted in her countenance, is gazing upon him. This is one of the happiest, noblest, grandest conceptions of genius. It is worthy of the subject. I hope every Senator will examine the models for himself. I hazard the assertion that, if every this work shall be finished according to the model, it would command in Europe five times the amount which it will cost in this country. I believe, however, from the enthusiasm of the artist, that he would rather have this work of his placed on the blocking of the Capitol, if he should receive from Government no more than a mere subsistence whilst engaged in its execution, than to realize a fortune from it in Europe.

If the Senator from South Carolina desires it, let him offer a separate resolution in favor of any other artist. He shall receive my vote. I should feel indebted to him, however, if he would suffer mine to take the usual direction without any amendment (1).

- (1) After further discussion, Mr. Preston's motion to refer the matter to the President was rejected, and Mr. Buchanan's resolution was agreed to.

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