

***The Freedman*, 1862–3**



**John Quincy Adams  
Ward** (1830–1910)  
Bronze, 19 5/8 x 15 3/4 x  
9 3/8 in., Art Institute of  
Chicago, Roger  
McCormick Endowment,  
1998.1

<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/149776>

**Readings:**

*American Arts at the Art Institute of Chicago* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1998), 193–5.

Kirk Savage, “Molding Emancipation: John Quincy Adams Ward’s *The Freedman* and the Meaning of the Civil War” in *Terrain of Freedom: American Art and the Civil War* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2001), 26–39.

*American Arts at  
The Art Institute of Chicago*

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From Colonial Times to World War I

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*Judith A. Barter, Kimberly Rhodes, and Seth A. Thayer,  
with contributions by Andrew Walker*

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

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*Distributed by Hudson Hills Press, New York*

*Mountains: Place and Perception*, exh. cat. (Durham, N.H., University Art Galleries, University of New Hampshire, 1980); and Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C., 1995), pp. 41–74.

7. "Domestic Gossip," *Crayon* 8 (Jan. 1861), p. 22.

## 88. JOHN QUINCY ADAMS WARD (1830–1910)

*The Freedman*, modeled in plaster 1863

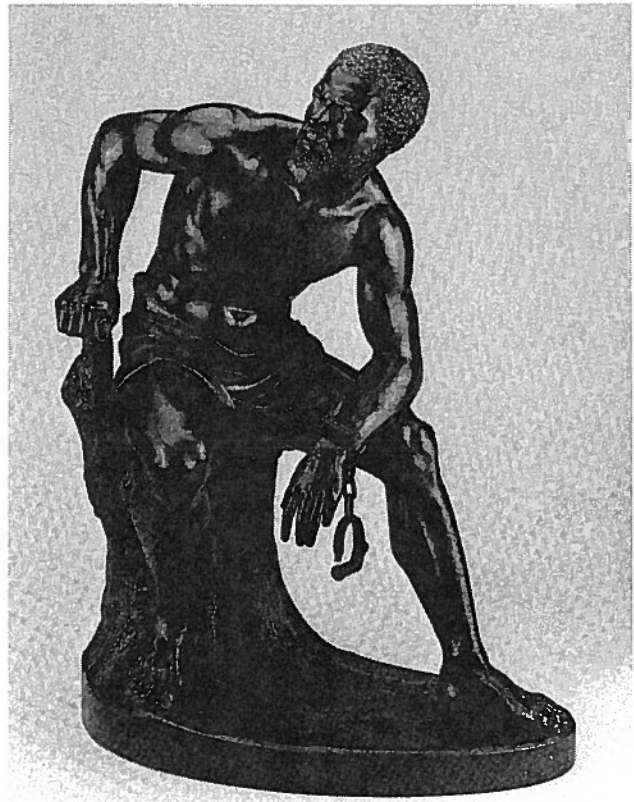
Bronze; 49.9 x 40 x 23.9 cm (19 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 9 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.)

Signed, on base: *J. Q. A. Ward. Sep. 1863*

Roger McCormick Endowment, 1998.<sup>1</sup>

John Quincy Adams Ward began his professional career as a sculptor in 1849 at age nineteen, when he apprenticed in the Brooklyn studio of Henry Kirke Brown (see cat. no. 76). Like Brown, Ward was a leader of the second generation of American sculptors who pioneered efforts to cast both public and private sculpture in bronze while maintaining a commitment to the neoclassical tradition of Horatio Greenough (see cat. no. 66). As director of the National Academy of Design in 1874, first president of the National Sculpture Society, and trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art—all in New York—Ward exercised enormous influence in the art world over his long career.<sup>1</sup>

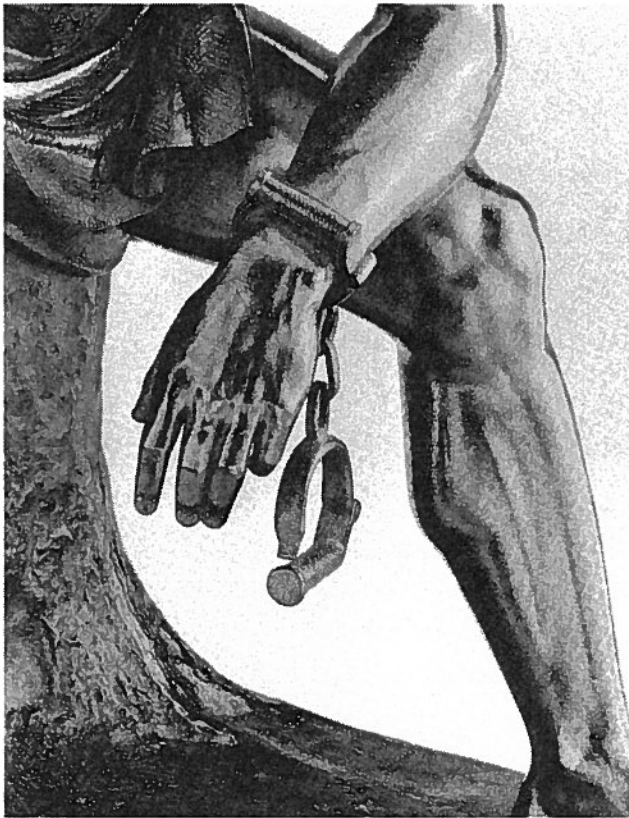
At no time was Ward's influence more keenly felt than during the period of national disillusionment produced by the Civil War. Increasingly the artist began to promote a new realism in sculpture to address pressing moral issues. In the fall of 1862, he began work on *The Freedman*. Modeled around the time of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation (issued on September 22, 1862), this powerful work embodies Ward's desire to put into sculptured form the injustice of slavery and the plight of the African-American. In contrast to the popular neoclassical allegory found in Hiram Powers's marble *Greek Slave* (1844; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut), Ward's bronze realistically depicts the twisting, muscular body of a seminude black man, seated on a tree stump. He has just broken free from the shackles that bound him to slavery; the remnants of the chains, potent reminders of his bondage, dangle from his wrist. Ward's statuette captures the slave's nobility through a combination of perfect classical proportion and physiognomic precision.



CAT. NO. 88

Modeled from life, *The Freedman* has generally been considered the first realist sculptural representation of an African-American. Although in general art critics did not note *The Freedman's* exact classical prototype, Ward probably derived the twisting torso of the figure—the focal point of the composition—from the *Belvedere Torso* (Vatican Museums, Rome). What fascinated contemporary writers was the sculpture's physiognomic accuracy. As one critic stated, "The peculiar characteristics of the [black] race, as distinguished from the white man or the red Indian, are made prominent and form a chief subject of interest. [This work] symbolizes the African race of America, the birth of a new people within the ranks of Christian civilization."<sup>2</sup> Ward, who reportedly made studies from a number of African-American models during his travels through the South, brilliantly combined realism and classicism to fashion the "perfect" black body from the perspective of the ideal male nude.<sup>3</sup>

The original plaster cast of the sculpture was first exhibited in New York at the National Academy of Design's annual exhibition in 1863, not long after the official publication of the



CAT. NO. 88, DETAIL

Emancipation Proclamation.<sup>4</sup> An article praising *The Freedman* appeared in the *New York Times* review of the show; in recognition of its merits, Ward was elected an academician by his colleagues.<sup>5</sup> One year later, James Jackson Jarves, a prominent American art critic, wrote a glowing assessment of *The Freedman*: "A naked slave has burst his shackles, and with uplifted face thanks God for freedom. We have seen nothing in our sculpture more soul-lifting or more comprehensively eloquent. It tells in one word the whole sad story of slavery and the bright story of emancipation."<sup>6</sup>

*The Freedman* proved to be a popular piece in the North, and numerous bronze replicas from Ward's maquette were made over the years at three different foundries.<sup>7</sup> In 1867 historian Henry Tuckerman even suggested the sculpture be replicated cheaply and in small scale so that the widest possible audience could experience Ward's noble work of art.<sup>8</sup> No doubt *The Freedman* also inspired later sculptors interested in the subject. A display at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia featured Italian sculptor Francesco Pezzicar's full-size bronze *The Freed Slave* (1873; Civico Museo Revoltella,



FIG. 45. "The Statue of 'The Freed Slave' in Memorial Hall," in *The Illustrated Historical Register of the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876* (Philadelphia, 1876), p. 133. Collection of Ryerson and Burnham Libraries, The Art Institute of Chicago.



FIG. 46. David Gilmour Blythe (1815–1865). *Old Virginia Home*, 1864. Oil on canvas; 52.7 x 72.4 cm (20<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 28<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Ada Turnbull Hertle Fund (1979.55).

Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Trieste).<sup>9</sup> A souvenir register of the fair (fig. 45) illustrates the seminude male figure holding in triumph the Emancipation Proclamation while a crowd of finely

dressed African-Americans displays a variety of reactions to the work.

In large part, *The Freedman's* popularity resulted from Ward's dignified presentation of his subject. Rarely shown as agents of their own liberation, freed slaves were commonly portrayed in the 1860s as being emancipated by either Abraham Lincoln or an allegory of liberty who smashes the chains of bondage.<sup>10</sup> The liberated African-American even became the focus of disturbing political allegory. David Gilmour Blythe's 1864 painting *Old Virginia Home* (fig. 46) depicts a caricatured black man leaving the war-torn plantation and dragging behind him the broken shackles of his ball and chain. Hunchbacked and wide-eyed, the freed slave trudges into an uncertain and dispirited future.<sup>11</sup> By contrast Ward's *The Freedman*, ready to stand and be counted, is a heroic representation and a poignant reminder of a tragic chapter in American history. The sculptor Lorado Taft's forceful words about the sculpture are as relevant today as they were when he wrote them in 1924: "But while we of the present please ourselves in analyzing the little figure, calmly dissecting its anatomy, it had quite a different appeal in the days of stress and struggle which gave it birth."<sup>12</sup>

#### NOTES

1. "John Quincy Adams Ward," *American Figurative Sculpture in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston, 1986), pp. 168–69.
2. Mr. Sturgis, cited in Lorado Taft, *The History of American Sculpture* (New York, 1924), p. 221.
3. Kurt Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, N.J., 1997), p. 57.
4. *Catalogue of the Thirty-Eighth Annual Exhibition of the National Academy of Design, 1863* (New York, 1863), p. 32, cat. no. 467, as "Freedman—Model for a Bronze Statuette." In 1863 Ward also displayed the maquette for *The Freedman* at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; see *Catalogue of the Fortieth Annual Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1863* (Philadelphia, 1863), p. 25, cat. no. 394, as "Statuette—The Freedman (model for bronze)."
5. "The Academy Exhibition," *New York Times*, June 24, 1863, p. 2.
6. Furthermore, Jarves recommended that *The Freedman* be cast in "heroic size" and placed next to the statue by Horatio Greenough of George Washington in the Capitol, "to commemorate the crowning virtue of democratic institutions in the final liberty of the slave." For a full account of Jarves's comments, see James Jackson Jarves, *The Art Idea*, ed. B. Rowland, Jr. (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 225.
7. These include the Ames Manufacturing Company of Chicopee, Mass.; Henry-Bonnard Company of New York City; and the Gorham Company Founders of Providence, R.I. As of 1985, when the art historian Lewis Sharp completed his catalogue raisonné of Ward's work, eight known copies had been located; see Lewis Sharp, *John Quincy Adams Ward, Dean of American Sculpture (with a Catalogue Raisonné)* (Newark, Del., 1985), pp. 153–56.

Other versions of *The Freedman* are included in the public collections of the Boston Athenaeum; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York; National Academy of Design, New York; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; Detroit Institute of Arts; and Cincinnati Art Museum.

8. Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life Comprising Biographical and Critical Sketches of American Artists, Preceded by an Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of Art in America* (1867; New York, 1967), pp. 581–82.
9. Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, vol. 4, pt. 1 (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 256–58.
10. Savage (note 3), p. 57.
11. For a full reading of Blythe's political allegory, see Bruce Chambers, *The World of David Gilmour Blythe*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C., National Collection of the Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, 1981), pp. 94–95.
12. Taft (note 2), p. 221.

## §9. CENTER TABLE (MARQUETRY TOP BY JOSEPH CREMER, PARIS [ACTIVE 1836–1878]), C. 1862

New York

Rosewood with tulip poplar, white pine, maple, various other inlaid woods, mother-of-pearl, and ormolu mounts; 137.2 x 91.4 x 74.6 cm (54 x 36 x 29<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.)

Top signed: *J. Cremer*; table frame impressed with the number 1007. Restricted gift of Jamee J. and Marshall Field, Mrs. Eric Oldberg, and the Winnetka Associates of the Woman's Board of the Art Institute; Americana, Brooks and Hope B. McCormick, J. Peter McCormick, and Mrs. Frank L. Sulzberger funds; Mary Waller Langhorne Endowment; and through prior acquisitions of Ellen N. LaMotte, Elizabeth R. Vaughan, and the Wirt D. Walker Endowment, 1993.122

Joseph Cremer, the maker of the marquetry top of this center table, was one of the premier French *ébénistes* of the nineteenth century and was touted as "being amongst the best workers in the revived art of marquetry" at the 1862 International Exhibition in London.<sup>1</sup> During his forty-plus years in business, Cremer successfully revived the French tradition of marquetry which had flourished during the reign of Louis XIV. This table top's oval marquetry panel is the first piece of American furniture incorporating a signed example of French marquetry: it bears Cremer's signature hidden in the floral decoration. Almost identical inlaid panels appear on at least three other cen-

# Terrain *of* Freedom

AMERICAN ART AND THE CIVIL WAR

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO *Museum Studies*

# Molding Emancipation: John Quincy Adams Ward's *The Freedman* and the Meaning of the Civil War

KIRK SAVAGE

*University of Pittsburgh*

By the spring of 1863, the bloodiest war in United States history had been dragging on for two full years. But the moral stakes of the conflict had changed profoundly, thanks to a wartime measure advanced by President Abraham Lincoln. On January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation had taken effect, officially transforming the Union war effort into a crusade against slavery. That same year, at the annual spring exhibition of the National Academy of Design in New York City, a smattering of patriotic artworks dealt with this momentous event. New York painter Henry Peters Gray showed his *America in 1862*, an allegorical image featuring a personification of America breaking the chains of a kneeling slave with one hand and giving the slave a sword with the other. While the painting is now lost, accounts in the contemporary press make clear that the

picture was little more than a piece of Union propaganda, cloaked in the elevated language of nineteenth-century academic art.<sup>1</sup>

Gray's allegory of the Emancipation Proclamation, like many others of the period, created an oversimplified and indeed misleading picture of the government's policy. Contrary to the claims of period recruiting posters such as *Freedom to the Slave* (fig. 1), which was circulated throughout the South by the Union Army, not "all slaves were made freedmen by Abraham Lincoln." In fact, Lincoln's proclamation did not free any slaves in Union territory, but rather promised freedom to those slaves in Confederate hands who could reach Union-controlled territory, or who could wait for the Union to reach them. Lincoln reasoned that the male slaves who could be drained from the Confederacy would become an important source of new manpower for the Union army, which is why Gray's figure of America hands the freed slave a sword. But unlike Gray's allegorical figure, who accomplishes all this simultaneously with two bold strokes of her hand, Lincoln's proclamation merely accelerated a process that had already been set in motion by the slaves themselves. Months before Lincoln signed the proclamation, slaves began taking their destiny in their own hands, escaping in increasing numbers to the Union lines and offering their services to the Union army in the cause of liberation.<sup>2</sup>

Gray's painting was not the only work in the National Academy of Design exhibition that was inspired by the Emancipation Proclamation. In a dimly lit corner of the display rooms there was a striking plaster statuette, barely less than two feet high, by the little-known sculptor John Quincy Adams Ward. This was *The Freedman*, shown here in a splendid bronze cast probably made from the original plaster model (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> Word of the piece soon spread, and critics hailed it in the local and

national press. Unlike Gray's painting, which was couched in the more abstract language of allegory and myth, Ward's piece struck contemporary critics as astonishingly realistic and direct, even more so because it was in the three-dimensional medium of sculpture—a medium in which African Americans had gone nearly unrepresented until then.<sup>4</sup> *The Freedman* was probably the first image of an African American ever cast in bronze, and it may have been the first African American figure in any sculptural medium to be shown in an American art exhibition. It is not surprising that the organizers of the exhibition put it in an inconspicuous corner; they must have been rather nervous about what reaction there would be to such an unprecedented work.<sup>5</sup>

*The Freedman* belonged to a well-established sculptural genre, that of the small-scale statuette purchased for display on a desk or a parlor mantel. Usually, these works represented the great white men whose lives embodied the dominant culture's idea of its own moral purpose. Such is the case with Thomas Ball's 1853 figure of Daniel Webster (fig. 3), represented here as a pillar of republican virtue and wisdom. In their cheaper plaster form, such statuettes were often called "images," and were sold door-to-door by Italian artisans throughout the Northeast. One popular figure, John Rogers's plaster *Slave Auction* (fig. 4), is the only real precursor of Ward's *Freedman*. But Rogers's piece, literally sold on the streets of New York, stayed in the humble universe of the image-peddlers and did not find its way into the high-art realm of the gallery and the bronze foundry, as Ward's piece succeeded in doing.<sup>6</sup>

For several years after the National Academy exhibition, critics remembered *The Freedman* and singled it out for praise. James Jackson Jarves, in his enormously popular book *The Art-Idea* (1864), suggested that the piece

might be enlarged and placed inside the United States Capitol building alongside Horatio Greenough's statue of George Washington (1841; Washington, D.C., Smithsonian American Art Museum), where it would "commemorate the crowning virtue of democratic institutions in the final liberty of the slave."<sup>7</sup> And in 1866, in an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* pondering the question of what Civil War monuments should look like, the author and literary critic William Dean Howells could find only one acceptable prototype for the new kind of work he wanted to see: *The Freedman*. Later, the popular critic Henry T. Tuckerman suggested that the statuette be reproduced in its small size and in a cheap material so that it could be "seen and possessed by the great mass of the people."<sup>8</sup> And yet despite all this attention and lavish praise, Ward's piece eventually lapsed into obscurity. It never did become enlarged to monumental size, nor was it reproduced in mass quantities. Ward managed to sell a few high-quality bronze casts, the exact number of which is unknown; some pirated casts also circulated. The work, however, never became the kind of cultural icon that critics such as Howells and Tuckerman envisioned.

This essay focuses on two key questions raised by this intriguing and important piece. The first is what made *The Freedman* so special, so meaningful in its own time—the period of the Civil War and its immediate aftermath. The second, perhaps more urgent to us in the early twenty-first century, is why Ward's work ultimately failed to become the great emblem of American liberty that so many critics hoped it would be. As we shall see, the answers to these two questions are linked. For what made *The Freedman* unconventional and innovative also made it problematic, at a time when the underlying issue of freedom was itself an unresolved dilemma.





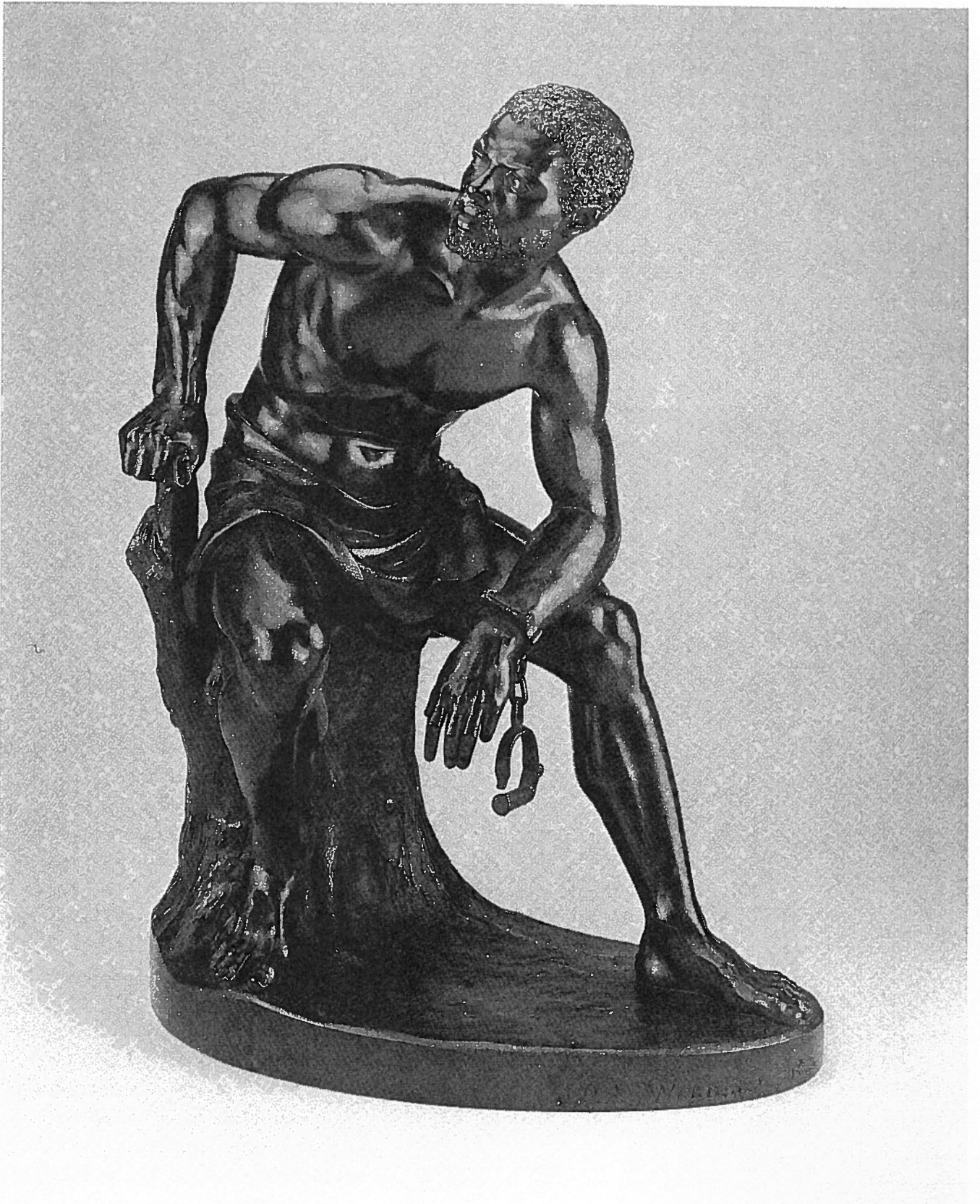
**FIGURE 1**  
 American. *Freedom to the Slave*, c. 1863. Hand-colored lithograph; 25.1 x 20.3 cm (9 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 8 in.). Chicago Historical Society, broadside collection.

In attempting to account for *The Freedman's* power over its mid-nineteenth-century viewers, we must first recognize that Ward, in creating his sculpture, departed dramatically from the standard visual formula for representing emancipation. In the conventional depictions, a standing figure representing white power symbolically frees a black slave who kneels or crouches below. Gray's *America in 1862* was an allegorical version of this formula, but a more common solution was to personalize the act of emancipation by putting Abraham Lincoln in the standing position of power (see fig. 5), as if Lincoln himself were a master personally freeing his own slave. This conceit of the standing figure and the kneeling

slave actually goes back to Roman antiquity and to the ceremony of manumission, the act by which a master voluntarily freed a slave. During manumission, a magistrate would touch a kneeling slave with a rod while the master stood above; the act of the slave crouching in obeisance, and indeed the point of the ceremony itself, was to reaffirm that the power relations between slave and master had not changed. Although nominally free, the ex-slave was still indebted to and subordinate to his master; in fact, most freed slaves in antiquity continued to depend on their masters for work and for protection.

While it is highly unlikely that those who designed the images of Lincoln emancipating slaves were aware of what the ancient Roman rite of manumission looked like, they managed to develop a visual conceit that was remarkably similar and conveyed much of the same sentiment. This formula represented the slave as a passive recipient of Lincoln's generosity, and in so doing encouraged viewers to see the slave as forever indebted to and dependent on Lincoln. Historically speaking, this imagery is nonsense: we know that slaves played a decisive role in their own liberation during the Civil War, and that Lincoln was probably more dependent on them for helping to erode the Confederacy's strength than they were on him. The many thousands of slaves who fled their Confederate masters during the war aided the Union cause in two crucial ways: first, by diminishing the labor force needed to run the South's civilian economy; and second, by joining the Union army and fighting against their former masters.<sup>9</sup>

This standard image of emancipation came most directly from the imagery of abolitionism. The basic abolitionist emblem was the figure of a kneeling black man in chains, his upraised arms imploring "Am I not a man and a brother?" (see fig. 6). This was certainly



PREVIOUS PAGE

FIGURE 2

John Quincy Adams Ward (American; 1830–1910). *The Freedman*, modeled in plaster, 1863. Bronze; 49.9 x 40 x 23.9 cm (19 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 15 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 9 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, Roger McCormick Endowment (1998.1).

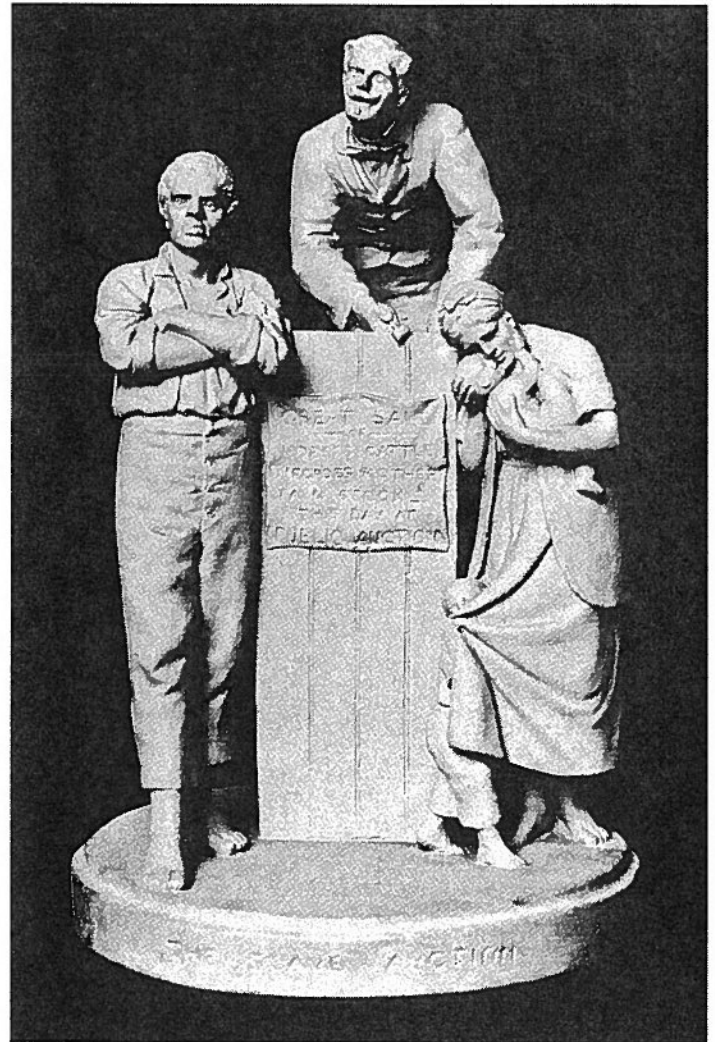


FIGURE 3

Thomas Ball (American; 1819–1911). *Daniel Webster*, modeled and cast 1853. Bronze; 76.2 x 30.4 x 27.9 cm (30 x 12 x 11 in.). The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Richard and Mary L. Gray (1986.1347).

FIGURE 4

John Rogers (American; 1829–1904). *The Slave Auction*, 1859. Plaster; 34 x 22.2 cm (13 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.). New-York Historical Society.



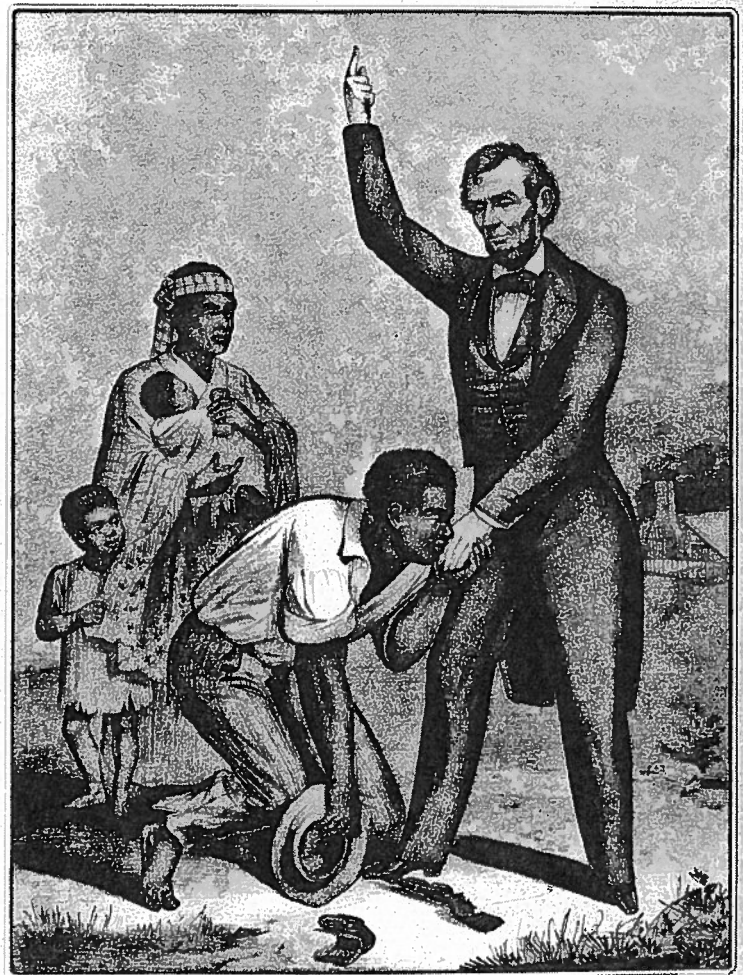
the most common representation of African Americans before the Civil War, and one of the most widespread images of any kind—printed all over the country, embroidered on pincushions, stitched into quilts, and stamped on medals. The black slave appears lowly and powerless, his pose and his physical contact with the ground emphasizing his abject state; unable to help himself, he implores the audience to notice and free him. This image, in effect, cried out for a savior, and artists were eager to oblige, readily combining the kneeling slave with a variety of standing saviors, such as Christ, Lincoln (see fig. 5), or allegorical figures such as Gray's.

Even more than other Americans of his era, Ward would have been deeply familiar with this pervasive abolitionist imagery: his teacher and mentor was Henry Kirke Brown, a sculptor with strong abolitionist leanings. In 1855, when Ward was still working in Brown's studio, the older artist created his own melancholy image of a slave, seated on a cotton bale, looking downcast. The slave figure was part of a larger model for a pediment that Brown had the audacity to propose for the United States Capitol, at a time when slaveholder Jefferson Davis was the cabinet secretary in charge of the building's construction.<sup>10</sup> Ward must have known Brown's slave figure quite well, for *The Freedman* seems to be a response to it. Both seated men lean forward, with torso twisted to the right and left leg thrust out. But in Ward's figure the limbs are untangled and released to act: the right arm, bent behind the back in Brown's design, presses down firmly on the tree stump in Ward's piece; the right leg, crossed behind the other leg in the earlier work, now pushes against the stump too; and the left arm, poised on the elbow in Brown's model, slides down to allow *The Freedman* to tilt his head upward. It is as if Brown's downcast figure suddenly comes to

life in Ward's hands, taking on energy and purpose. Ward's figure breaks decisively from the abolitionist tradition, followed by Brown, of representing slaves as abject, dependent beings. Ward's freedman does not beg or despair. He has gotten off the ground and broken his own chains, which he still clenches in one fist. He turns his head alertly, his brows knit, his gaze intent on something in the distance. No longer passively awaiting salvation from above, this figure exudes an active force shaping his own destiny. He does this without the presence of a white savior helping or encouraging him to

FIGURE 5

Currier and Ives  
(American; act.  
1824–1895). *Freedom  
to the Slaves*, 1863.  
Lithograph; 40.6 x  
29.5 cm (16 x 11 7/8 in.).  
Chicago Historical  
Society.



### FREEDOM TO THE SLAVES.

Proclaimed January 1st 1863, by ABRAHAM LINCOLN, President of the United States.  
"PROCLAIM LIBERTY THROUGHOUT ALL THE LAND UNTO ALL THE INHABITANTS THEREOF." Lev. XXV 10.

get up; this is his story alone, not the story of white charity.

It was not only its departure from the standard imagery of emancipation that made *The Freedman* so remarkable in 1863: the sculpture was also striking in its realism. Abandoning the trappings of allegory, *The Freedman* told a more straightforward and familiar narrative, one based on the repeated experiences of real slaves. This was the common wartime story of fugitive slaves fleeing the Confederacy and seeking freedom behind Union lines—the very act that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation was trying to capitalize on. The few cues that Ward’s sculpture gives—the tree stump, the broken chain, the figure’s searching look into the distance—suggest that this man is pausing in his flight from slavery.

Even as he enacts this familiar wartime narrative, however, it is less than clear what

Ward’s figure is actually doing. At first glance, he appears to be resting easily on the tree stump; his pose, however, is by no means so simple. Bent forward, his body balances edgily between repose and movement. His taut right forearm, veins bulging from the skin, pushes down on the stump, transferring the brunt of his weight through the other arm to the leg planted in front. At the same time, his abdomen is pulled in and tensed, keeping the weight of his body from sinking down into the seat. It is, in short, impossible to tell whether the figure is sitting down or getting up: his body is not resting or moving forward, but is suspended in an in-between state, coiled in anticipation—just as the broken chains still attached to his body suggest that he occupies a liminal position, neither completely beyond the realm of slavery nor entirely within the world of freedom. Ward’s subject remains in the fugitive’s state of limbo, where his fate is not yet clear.

Another question raised by Ward’s realism is why the figure is nude. Obviously, real fugitive slaves did not embark on their arduous journeys unclothed. Popular representations of such figures in news magazines tended to emphasize the tattered clothing of the runaway as he arrived in Union territory (see fig. 7), garments that were later replaced by the crisp uniform of a Union soldier. If the former slave was shown undressed in these illustrations, it was to display the scars that gave witness to slavery’s cruelty—scars that Ward’s flawless figure certainly does not bear.<sup>11</sup>

*The Freedman*, of course, was not a throw-away magazine illustration but a work of sculpture, and the nude body was thought to be the most venerable subject a sculptor could undertake. For Ward, making the figure nude allowed him to model the minutiae of joint, muscle, and vein, just the sort of realistic detail that was usually absent in the more smooth and

**FIGURE 6**

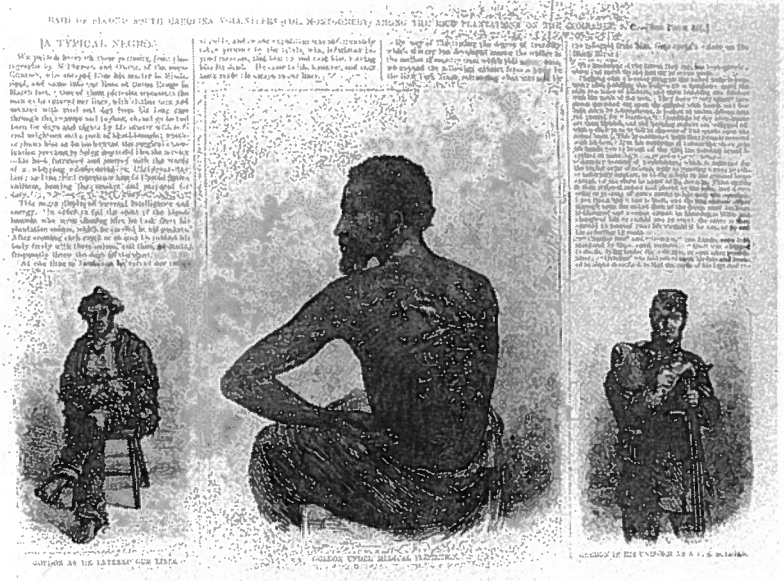
John Greenleaf Whittier (American; 1807–1892). *Our Countryman in Chains! Am I Not a Man and a Brother?*, c. 1837 (detail). Woodcut on paper. Bayou Bend, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



doughy surfaces of the typical “ideal” sculpture of the day (see for example fig. 8). (When Ward copied the figure from plaster to bronze, the superior surface detail of cast metal made this “naturalism” of the body even more apparent.) The scrupulous rendering of vein and flexed muscle is precisely what allows the viewer to grasp the exact tension of the pose, to see it as a specific moment in a specific man’s life.

Indeed, the nude body did have a peculiar logic in Ward’s narrative. As a subject, the fugitive slave did not have a fixed social identity that demanded a certain sort of clothing. No longer on the plantation, he did not need or want the slave laborer’s garb; but not yet a free man, he could not assume the uniform of a citizen or soldier. In the before-and-after images of escaped slaves that were common at the time (see fig. 7), the replacement of the slave’s tattered clothes with a starched Union uniform registered most clearly the black man’s new social identity. By removing his freedman’s clothes, Ward situated the figure in between these two states—after the before, and before the after. Thus, *The Freedman’s* nudity functions as a kind of double sign, pointing in one direction to the man’s vulnerability (as a slave on the run) and in another direction to his heroic potential (as a free man). In one respect, the lack of clothing does not compromise the subject’s realism, for the revealed body does indeed look real in every way. But in his glorious nudity, the figure is lifted from the real world of tired, sweating, bruised, and scarred bodies into an idealized, heroic register.

This is why most contemporary critics responded to Ward’s sculpture so strongly: for them, *The Freedman* seamlessly combined the real and the ideal. The figure appeared to be a study after life of an actual man, yet resembled the best of Greek sculpture; in fact, Ward probably modeled the torso on a well-known fragment of ancient Greek sculpture,



the *Torso Belvedere* (1st century B.C.; Rome, Musei Capitolini).<sup>12</sup> That this classicized figure was a black man—a subject that had rarely been attempted in American sculpture—made it all the more remarkable. African Americans had already been subjected to decades of caricature in popular prints such as Winslow Homer’s *Our Jolly Cook* (fig. 10), so the fact that Ward could achieve this combination of intense realism and idealizing classicism in the figure of an African American man was astonishing to white critics of the day. “It is a negro, and nothing more,” wrote the abolitionist newspaper *The Independent*, “yet it makes the nearest approach . . . to the statuary of the Greeks of any modern piece of sculpture we have seen.”<sup>13</sup>

At least one critic, the editor of the art journal *The New Path*, argued in January 1864 that the perfection of Ward’s figure was its moral undoing. Far from upsetting the pro-slavery men, this critic asserted, *The Freedman’s* splendid physique would have pleased them. “With such a model on his mantelpiece how [the slave owner’s] imagination

FIGURE 7  
American. Gordon  
*as He Entered Our  
Lines*, July 1863. Wood  
engraving, published  
in *Harper’s Weekly* 7,  
(July 4, 1863), p. 429.

would have glowed over the fancy price to be obtained for such a display of bone and muscle.”<sup>14</sup> Yet this critic failed to mention that there is not a single example of a black slave in sculpture in any art collection in the antebellum South. Why were slaves absent in sculpture when they had such high value as human property? For the same reason that *The Freedman* would never sit comfortably on a slave owner’s mantelpiece: its idealized sculptural nudity had a moral dimension, a heroic cast.<sup>15</sup>

What viewers encounter in *The Freedman*, therefore, is not so much a portrait of a “real” slave or a “real” freedman, but rather an idealized representative of black manhood poised on the threshold of freedom. His prospects

remain undetermined. While he lacks almost everything—clothes, material goods, and, by extension, social standing and political rights—his powerful frame and his look of determination reveal a heroic potential, the potential for transformation into a fully formed, fully acting social being. As Ward himself wrote when he entered the sculpture into the 1863 National Academy exhibition in New York, his subject has not yet won the struggle for freedom, but he has not yet lost it either:

I shall send tomorrow or next day a plaster model of a figure which we call the “Freedman” for want of a better name, but I intended it to express not one set free by any proclamation so much as by his own love of freedom and a conscious *power* to brake [*sic*] things—the struggle is not over with him (as it never is in this life) yet I have tried to express a degree of hope in his undertaking.<sup>16</sup>

Ward’s remarks reveal how consciously he set about to craft a sculptural narrative that resists any clear ending, and refuses to offer an easy answer to the problem of freedom. “The struggle is not over with him,” Ward wrote, “yet I have tried to express a degree of hope in his undertaking.” This deliberate ambiguity is perhaps the most striking difference between *The Freedman* and more standard celebratory representations of emancipation. Such images (see fig. 5) framed emancipation as a closed historical episode, an achievement already accomplished and finalized: Lincoln frees the slaves—end of story. This is not surprising, given that these images were made by white artists and represent a white point of view on history: their whole point was to make the white nation look good, to applaud white leaders for bringing freedom to abject black slaves. Artists had every reason to make emancipation look decisive and conclusive, since the more there was to celebrate, the less there was to fret about.

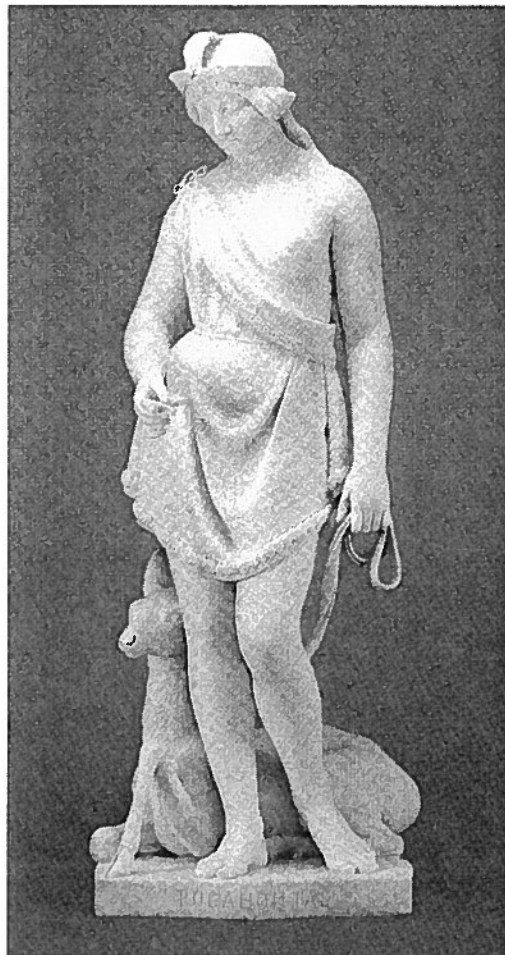


FIGURE 8

Joseph Mozier  
(American; 1812–1870).  
*Pocahontas*, 1868.  
Marble; 121 cm (48 in.)  
on original marble  
pedestal. The Art Insti-  
tute of Chicago,  
Roger McCormick and  
Peter J. McCormick  
funds (1997.366).

With *The Freedman*, Ward turned this whole representational approach on its head: he did not attempt to celebrate the moral achievement of America's white leadership, but instead concentrated on the experience of emancipation from the perspective of the slave. And from that perspective, emancipation was only just beginning. Lincoln's proclamation was merely one step in a larger historical struggle that African Americans knew was far from over. The plight of Ward's fugitive can be read as a metaphor for the plight of all African Americans, at least all African American men: even if nominally freed, they had still not achieved liberty in the full sense. As Eric Foner points out in this collection, they had not yet secured their position in American society as citizens with the same rights and responsibilities as their white counterparts enjoyed. Indeed, Ward was not satisfied with his title, *The Freedman*, because it suggested misleadingly that freedom had already been secured, when, in fact, the outcome of emancipation was still in doubt, both for this individual fugitive and for the race and gender he represented.<sup>17</sup>

If it was in fact such a revolutionary portrayal of emancipation, then, why did *The Freedman* fail to become the great cultural icon, the great emblem of American liberty, that some of its critics hoped it would? Our discussion already contains the seeds of an answer. As we have seen, *The Freedman* did not in fact declare the black man's liberty. Instead, the sculpture was a declaration of the *possibility* of liberty, and of the black man's determination to make that possibility a reality. Ward conceived his work in a moment of great historical transition, and he used the opportunity to represent the paradoxical space between slavery and freedom in which many African Americans found themselves during the Civil War. But as the conflagration came to an end,



FIGURE 9

Currier and Ives. *The Colored Volunteer*, 1863/64. Hand-colored lithograph; 37.8 x 25.7 cm (14 7/8 x 10 1/8 in). Chicago Historical Society.

that space seemed to disappear as events overtook *The Freedman's* story and made it seem obsolete. Shortly after Ward first exhibited the piece in the summer of 1863, the Confederate army lost at Gettysburg and the South's military fortunes began to sour. That same summer, black soldiers began to fight for the Union in their first major battles, displaying their heroism to a skeptical white public. The black man, it seemed, was no longer suspended between worlds; he was standing tall in uniform, and fighting for his freedom (see fig. 9). More and more African Americans joined the Union army, and slavery crumbled ever more rapidly until it was finally abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 (see Foner, p. 19).

Perhaps this is why *The Freedman* underwent a curious title change when it was exhibited in Chicago in June 1865, shortly after the war had ended. There, at a benefit exhibition





**FIGURE 10**  
Winslow Homer  
(American; 1836–1910).  
*Our Jolly Cook*,  
from the series *Campaign Sketches*,  
1863. Tint lithograph  
on heavy ivory  
wove paper; 35.7 x  
27.7 cm (14 x 10<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.).  
The Art Institute  
of Chicago, promised  
gift of Dorothy Braude  
Edinburg to the  
Harry B. and Bessie K.  
Braude Memorial  
Collection (117.92)

for the United States Sanitary Commission, the work appeared as *The Slave*, the exact opposite of its original title.<sup>18</sup> This odd slippage in naming points to an interpretive ambiguity inherent in Ward's sculpture: since his figure of the black fugitive occupies an uncertain space between slavery and freedom, the specific historical context in which the work was displayed and viewed might easily shift its meaning in one direction or the other. In the context of its original, 1863 exhibition, with the institution of slavery just beginning to disintegrate, viewers naturally focused on the figure's act of liberation: having broken his own chains, he became a metaphor for the larger drama of emancipation. But in 1865—with slavery now destroyed by the war, and with two hundred thousand African Americans having served in uniform—it was easier to focus on what the figure lacked. At that moment, *The Freedman* looked more slave than free.

*The Freedman's* ambiguous nature in fact suggests the deeper ambivalence that characterizes the concept of freedom itself. Freedom, as Foner's essay here makes clear, is by

no means a static or unitary concept. To a person who is bound and gagged in a chair, for instance, the simple act of breaking those restraints will seem like complete freedom. But to a person who is used to sitting comfortably in their own chair, the liberty to get up at will may well seem insignificant; they will probably define freedom quite differently, perhaps as the right to speak openly or to seek equal opportunity in the workplace. Freedom is measured on a continuum, and has many different variables.

In 1865, former slaves were in the process of negotiating freedom's protean meanings, as they struggled to define and secure freedom on their own terms. Although no longer suffering the obvious legal restraints of slavery, their ability to participate in the life of the nation was by no means assured. This was what Reconstruction was all about—a battle over what freedom would actually mean for the millions of slaves who had been emancipated during and after the war. Would they have the right to vote, for example? Would they have access to education and land on which to farm? As Ward had predicted in 1863, their struggle was “not over”; it was, in fact, only beginning.<sup>19</sup>

In light of these unsettled questions, the triumphant optimism of works such as Edmonia Lewis's *Forever Free* (fig. 11) actually appears more dated than the tense uncertainty and grave determination displayed by Ward's statuette. Given the ongoing struggles of Reconstruction, it is hardly surprising that even in the mid-to-late 1860s, years after the last escapes of fugitive slaves, *The Freedman* still had the power to compel its viewers. It was during this period after the war that Howells proposed that the work be transformed into a public monument. Critics such as Howells and Tuckerman were still so amazed by the piece's combination of realism and idealism that it continued to function for them as a model for representing the new black man.<sup>20</sup>

In its ambiguity, however, *The Freedman* was virtually the opposite of what a nineteenth-century American public monument was expected to be. Public monuments were not intended to pose questions; they were supposed to provide answers. Commemorative sculptures of heroes and events were not meant to continue old struggles and debates, but were instead designed to show how great men and their deeds made the nation better and stronger than it was before. The purpose of such public monuments was to condense history's moral lessons and fix them in place for all time. This meant that what was being commemorated, whether it be a person or an event, had to be imagined as part of a completed stage of history, and nestled safely in a sealed past. *The Freedman* quite clearly fails to convey this kind of historical closure: indeed, by suggesting that history is a process of ongoing struggle rather than a simple record of great achievements, it subverts the whole notion of history implicit in public monuments of its time.<sup>21</sup>

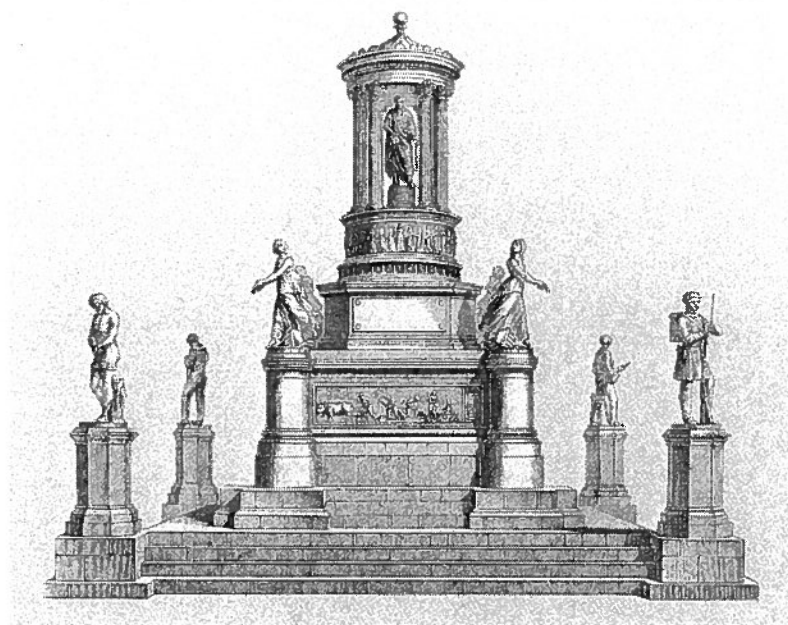
During the mid-to-late 1860s, several sculptors were working on public monuments dealing with emancipation, and all of them sought in one way or another to bring the subject to closure. Harriet Hosmer's grand, unrealized proposal for the *Freedmen's Memorial to Lincoln* in Washington, D.C. (fig. 12), was the most optimistic of these, displaying a cycle of African American history that culminated in the confident figure of an African American citizen-soldier. Far more common were plans that adhered to the earlier representational formula of depicting Lincoln freeing a subservient slave. Produced by white artists working for white monument committees, these designs fit squarely within the standard, self-congratulatory view of emancipation as a great and inspired act of white moral leadership. The only one actually built was Thomas Ball's proposal for the *Freedmen's Memorial to Lincoln*,

unveiled in Washington, D.C. in 1876 (fig. 13). Ironically, while African Americans funded the monument with voluntary contributions, they had no control over its design, which was decided by the Western Sanitary Commission, the white philanthropic organization put in charge of the money; another one hundred years would go by before African Americans gained any measure of control over their representation in public space.<sup>22</sup>

*The Freedmen's Memorial* came to be known as the "Emancipation Monument," and for many decades it served as the standard image of emancipation in the United States. This was unfortunate not only because the monument made the slave the passive recipient of Lincoln's gift of freedom, but also because it fixed in bronze forever the master-servant relationship that so clearly encoded racial



FIGURE 11  
Edmonia Lewis  
(American; c. 1843–  
after 1911). *Forever  
Free*, 1867. Marble;  
104.8 x 55.9 x 43.2 cm  
(41¼ x 22 x 17 in.).  
Howard University  
Gallery of Art,  
Washington, D.C.



**FIGURE 12**  
Harriet Hosmer  
(American; 1830–1908).  
*Freedman's Memorial  
to Lincoln*, 1867. Photo  
courtesy Ryerson  
and Burnham Libraries.

hierarchy: while the point of the statue's emancipation narrative is that Lincoln's act will enable the black man to rise, he never does because the monument, in its very permanence, fixes him literally and figuratively in his place. "Shine, Sir?" was how many African Americans referred to this disastrous project. Even so, the monument was used recently as the backdrop for Washington, D.C.'s revived Emancipation Day celebration, although not without controversy.<sup>23</sup>

By now it should be clear that *The Freedman* was unsuitable in almost every way to serve as the kind of public monument nineteenth-century Americans preferred. As we have seen, there is no white person in the image; it does not congratulate white society, even indirectly; and it does not even suggest that emancipation was definitive or successful. But these are all reasons why *The Freedman* spoke so insightfully and so truthfully about the historical experience of emancipation. Even after the Radical-Republican Congress had passed the Fourteenth Amendment

declaring racial equality before the law, for example, emancipation was still by no means real and complete. During Reconstruction, African Americans struggled against great odds for economic self-determination even as Southern whites fought to deprive them of their newly won political rights (see Foner, p. 19). As we know now, this was a battle that African Americans eventually lost: by the end of the nineteenth century, segregation and structural inequality (economic, political, and social) were the norm throughout the South and much of the North as well. While nominally free, African Americans were certainly not the full citizens they had expected to become when they took up arms for the Union cause from 1863 onward.

*The Freedman*, then, would have made an effective and powerful national monument, not for the reason Jarves gave in *The Art-Idea*—he thought it would crown democracy by showing the "final liberty of the slave"—but for quite the opposite reason. Because it purposely did not show the final liberty of the slave, *The Freedman* would have stood as a challenge to the nation to complete the process of emancipation which had been started during the war. Just imagine for a moment *The Freedman* enlarged to over life size and erected in place of Ball's design for the *Freedman's Memorial*, or even better yet, installed under the great dome of the Capital Rotunda, as Jarves had suggested in 1864. If Ward's figure were greatly enlarged, its heroism magnified by the increase in scale and its tense alertness all the more striking, a typical reaction might be: "Why isn't this man free? Doesn't he deserve to be? Hasn't he risked everything for the chance to take his rightful place in the nation?" No matter how determined this fugitive seemed to be to escape the bonds of slavery, no matter how heroic his tale of flight from persecution, his final fate depended on one essential question:

whether the nation would choose to accept him into its fold. And that is the great problem that *The Freedman* would have posed to white America as the nation retreated from the great promise of racial equality made immediately after the war.

Of course, the promises of emancipation were not realized. *The Freedman* never did find its way into the Capitol building, or anywhere else in public space. Ward himself never again represented African American subjects in this way; he went on to become a famous artist, executing the sort of stock-in-trade commissions that most sculptors hoped to receive, primarily statues of white heroes. In fact, he was one of the first sculptors to design a new kind of memorial that appeared after the Civil War, the “standing soldier monument” that appeared on innumerable town greens and squares to commemorate the ordinary white infantrymen who served. Howells had hoped that such military monuments would disappear from the American landscape, and that Americans would choose instead to commemorate the war with images such as *The Freedman* in order to evoke the conflict’s moral purpose.<sup>24</sup> In retrospect, Howells’s thought seems wildly naïve; he was swimming against the tide.

Ward, however, decided to swim with the tide. He abandoned the experimental, subversive mode of *The Freedman* and produced the kind of celebratory monuments that most Americans wanted. The only other African American figure he made was the figure of an adolescent girl who appears properly grateful on the base of a memorial in Brooklyn to the abolitionist preacher Henry Ward Beecher.<sup>25</sup> It is a national misfortune that Ward did not continue in the vein of *The Freedman*, since there was precious little public sculpture in



the nineteenth century (or even the twentieth) that treated African Americans with any dignity: one of the few exceptions is Augustus Saint-Gaudens’s memorial in Boston to the 54th Massachusetts Infantry led by Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, with its remarkably individualized portraits of disciplined black soldiers.<sup>26</sup> Only in the past two decades or so have American artists and their publics begun to see that public art must represent the United States as an interracial nation; war memorials, for example, at both the local and national levels, now routinely represent ethnic diversity. Yet Ward’s aesthetic and political experiment in *The Freedman* still has not been surpassed. Nothing so immediate and direct, yet so challenging, has appeared in our own time to open up the prospect, as *The Freedman* once did, of a new and better world.

**FIGURE 13**

Thomas Ball  
(American; 1819–1911).  
*Freedmen’s Memorial  
to Lincoln*, 1876.  
Bronze; Lincoln Park,  
Washington, D.C.  
Photo courtesy of the  
Library of Congress,  
Washington, D.C.