

# DAHESH MUSEUM OF ART

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## **FACING THE OTHER: CHARLES CORDIER, ETHNOGRAPHIC SCULPTOR**

*October 12, 2004 – January 9, 2005*

New York, NY – This fall, the Dahesh Museum of Art is pleased to bring to this country the first monographic exhibition devoted to Charles Cordier, the leading ethnographic sculptor of 19th-century France, whose work emerged from the mainstream of his time to make a singular claim on the attention of our own: Cordier was one of the first artists committed to capturing the diverse beauty of humanity in various stones and metal finishes.

*Facing the Other: Charles Cordier, Ethnographic Sculptor* brings together some 60 sculptures—many never exhibited before—as well as paintings, prints, and photographs documenting the artist's career, borrowed from important public and private collections in France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.

Cordier's *oeuvre*, devoted to the depiction of people of various races (as race was understood in the 19th century), stands on its own artistic merits while documenting the distinctively 19th-century moment when a nascent commitment to ethnographic veracity blended with a taste for lavish decoration. Men and women of North and Sub-Saharan Africa, China, India, the Near and Middle East, and the Mediterranean were among Cordier's subjects.

While celebrated in his lifetime by many critics and artists, including Auguste Rodin and Jean-Jacques Pradier, Cordier had to defend both his subjects and his materials throughout his career. In a not unfamiliar trajectory, critical esteem and commercial success during his lifetime were followed quickly by obscurity. Certain of Cordier's pieces, however, have clearly regained their appeal: in recent years, sculptures like the *Negro of the Sudan* and the *Capresse of the Colonies* (both included in the exhibition) have become favorites of visitors to the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Now, a century after his death, Cordier's vision of the human family—a kind of aesthetic egalitarianism fully realized in his *oeuvre*—the adventurous innovation with which he used materials, and the charm of the works themselves, make this exhibition unique and compelling. It is only now, and only at the Dahesh Museum of Art, that we can admire him anew.

*FACING THE OTHER* opens at the Dahesh Museum of Art, 580 Madison Avenue, between 56<sup>th</sup> and 57<sup>th</sup> Streets, on October 12, 2004 and remains on view until January 9, 2005. It was organized by the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, in conjunction with the Dahesh Museum of

Art and the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. The exhibition was curated by Laure de Margerie, Archivist, and Edouard Papet, Curator of Sculpture, both at the Musée d'Orsay. Stephen R. Edidin, the Dahesh's Chief Curator, has coordinated the exhibition in New York. The Dahesh Museum of Art's exhibition partners are Air France, WNYC, and WHERE New York magazine. The accompanying English-language publication is made possible in part by the Isaacson-Draper Foundation.

*"Because beauty is not the province of a privileged race, I convey to the world of art the idea of the universality of beauty. Every race has its beauty, which differs from that of other races. The most beautiful Negro is not the one who looks most like us..."*

*Charles Cordier, 1862*

## **AN EXTRAORDINARY CAREER**

Charles Cordier's artistic career seemed, at first, to follow a conventional academic course. Born in Cambrai, in northern France, to a bourgeois family, he studied drawing in a local art school, won several prizes, and was sent in his teens to study modeling with a provincial sculptor, whom he followed to Paris. But there, soon after a brief period of study at the École des Beaux-Arts, his singular blend of artistic and scientific interests took him into uncharted waters of subject and style, through a highly productive career whose last 15 years were spent in Algeria, where he was a founder and first president of the Society of Algerian Artists.

Cordier's credentials as an academic sculptor were in fact impeccable. His teacher, François Rude (1784-1855), created France's greatest republican sculpture, the massive *La Marseillaise* that crowns the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, and his own works include academic sculptures, official portrait busts, private commissions, and public monuments. He took part in decorative projects for the Paris *Opéra* and the Louvre. Among his patrons were Napoleon III, the Empress Eugénie, and Baron James de Rothschild.

But Cordier's flair for technical innovation set him apart. While most of his contemporaries continued to produce white marble statuary of the sort that had dominated sculpture for centuries, he was among those who, inspired by the recent discovery that the ancient Greeks and Romans had painted their sculpture, introduced polychromy (Greek for "many colors") into their work. Even in this company, Cordier arguably went furthest. To marbles of diverse colors and textures, from quarries in Algeria and Greece that had gone unused since antiquity, he added varied patinas of bronze as well as enamel, exploiting emergent technology such as galvanoplasty (precious metal plating.)

Like many of his contemporaries, Cordier traveled widely, and was particularly drawn to North Africa and the Middle East. But these voyages reflected an impulse far from the conventional "Orientalism" which sought, in the "Other", exotic refractions of oneself. His first voyage, a foray into Algeria in 1856, was a government-sponsored mission to "study the various indigenous peoples from the standpoint of art." This was followed, over the next 15 years, by assignments to various areas of the Mediterranean, particularly Greece and Egypt, with similar anthropological aims.

What distinguished Cordier's career most strongly is the overarching theme of an ethnographic art, serving both scientific and aesthetic ends: to create a gallery of the races that would document what he called "the universality of beauty."

In this regard, a single episode seems pivotal. In 1848, Cordier was no longer Rude's pupil, but remained loyal to his master and often visited his studio. There he met Seïd Enkess, a former Nubian slave who had become a professional model, and executed a bust of this man that he exhibited at the Paris Salon in that revolutionary year.

In his memoirs, Cordier describes the episode thus: "*A superb Sudanese appeared in the studio. Within a fortnight, I made this bust. With a comrade, I carried it to my room, by my bed... I coddled the artwork... I had it cast and sent to the Salon... It was a revelation for the whole art world... My genre had the novelty of a new subject, the revolt against slavery, anthropology at its birth.*"

The work had in fact a "novelty" of a most immediate kind: before Cordier, non-allegorical representations of Africans in Western art had been few indeed. In a broader sense, what was novel in Cordier's approach -- an objective, empathic attention to the diverse forms of humanity, exquisitely modeled -- has lost none of its immediacy two centuries later. In fact, Laure de Margerie writes, "With this exhibition, we rediscover Charles Cordier, a great sculptor and a great portraitist. How inspired Cordier was when sculpting foreign models, as if he was freed from the social demand of representation--as if the artist/model relationship was then totally unconstrained."

## THE EXHIBITION

*Facing the Other* is organized into six thematic sections, with informative wall text and labels, including a chronology of Cordier's life and a small gallery devoted to the projection of the 19th-century photographs that were popular at the time and may have influenced Cordier's creative process.

### ***THE SALON OF 1848 AND THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY***

The 1848 Paris Salon, in which Cordier exhibited his bust of Seïd Enkess, was still in progress when, by decree of the Second Empire government, slavery was abolished in France and all its colonies—a coincidence that the sculptor recalled in his unpublished *Reminiscences*. This epochal government action was actually France's second try at eliminating slavery: the first, in 1794, during the French Revolution, was reversed by Napoleon eight years later.

Cordier's sympathies apparently went well beyond the political issue of abolition to embrace a more radical egalitarianism. Not only was he the only 19th-century sculptor to set as his goal the systematic depiction of humanity in all its diversity, his widely cited declaration that "beauty is not the attribute of a privileged race..." ran counter to prevailing ethnocentric notions of a racial hierarchy, with Europeans at the pinnacle. When visiting Algiers, according to an 1865 article in *La vie Parisienne*, he stayed in the non-European quarter, where "I got on

well with everyone, and as my door was always open, pretty soon I entertained quite a crowd of visitors.”

His commitment to egalitarian ideals is confirmed by a sculpture that he executed 20 years after the abolition decree (at which time slavery in the French colonies did in fact persist in unofficially sanctioned forms): the allegorical group of 1867, *Love One Another (The Union of the Races or Brotherhood)*, was inspired by a print from the period of the 1789 Revolution and depicts a black child and a white child embracing. Originally sculpted in black, white, and yellow marble, the bronze reduction with gold and black patination, on view in this exhibition, remains striking today, and must have seemed even more radical when it first appeared.

*Saïd Abdallah of the Mayac Tribe, Kingdom of Darfur*, the 1848 bronze portrait bust of the “superb Sudanese” that marked the transformation of Cordier’s career, was also exhibited at the 1851 Great Crystal Palace Exhibition in London alongside its pendant, the *African Venus*, also in bronze. That stunning figure was modeled by a young woman who had been sold by a slaver in Guadeloupe, while only a child, and freed by a rich colonist several years later. Executed at different times, these busts were acquired at the same time by Queen Victoria as a gift for her husband, Prince Albert.

By the end of the century, plaster replicas of *Saïd Abdallah* and *African Venus* were available in the United States. Daniel Chester French, the sculptor who executed the figure of Abraham Lincoln for the Lincoln Memorial, was among the purchasers: a variation of *African Venus* graces his *Four Continents* sculpture in front of the US Customs House in lower Manhattan.

#### **THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL GALLERY**

Cordier saw himself in the context of “the birth of anthropology,” and on various occasions described his work as being in the service of both art and science. He became a member of the Society of Anthropology of Paris in 1860, just one year after it was founded.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century in France was a time of great interest in people of foreign lands. This often took the form of spectacle: Laplanders, Inuits, Native Americans, Bantus, African Bushmen, and Aztecs were on display, essentially as curiosities, in Paris and elsewhere in Europe during this period. The Garden of Acclimatization (*Le Jardin d’Acclimatation*), which opened in Paris’ Bois de Boulogne in 1859, drew great crowds anxious to see such “exotic” people. At universal expositions, foreigners were installed in reconstructed villages to create “living dioramas.”

The extent to which Cordier patronized such exhibitions is unclear from the sparse sketches, notebooks, and other documentation of his life that have come down to us, but it seems likely that he did attend them, given their broad popularity. What is certain is that his scientific ambitions led him to seek models outside Europe, in a more naturalistic context. This, along with the search for new sources of marble, was the motivating force behind the missions that brought him to Africa, Greece, and Egypt in the years 1851-1866.

“*Sail up the Nile, choose Coptes, or Abyssinians with their true beauty—now that is what has not yet been done; artists have produced mere suggestions,*” he wrote in a letter of 1865. “I

*wish to represent the race just as it is, in its own beauty, absolutely true to life, with its passions, its fatalism, in its quiet pride and conceit, in its fallen grandeur, but the principles of which remain since Antiquity.*”

Respect for his models and desire to serve the imperatives of art and science led Cordier to eschew the use of life casts, which he claimed “weakens the flesh and suffocates the body,” in favor of direct observation and exact measurement, a procedure he described in some detail in a 1862 presentation to the Society of Anthropology:

*“I start from some central point—for example, the center of the ear—to determine the slant of the medial line from the chin to the occipital bone; then I trace the arc of a circle, beneath which I determine the position of each feature, each depression, every landmark...”*

The scientific respect accorded to Cordier’s ethnographic busts is suggested by the inclusion of 15 of them in the Anthropological Gallery of the Museum of Natural History in Paris, alongside life casts, skulls, skeletons, mummies, and photographs. Cordier mounted his own *Anthropological and Ethnographic Gallery, a Basis for the History of Races*, at the Paris Palace of Industry in 1860: it included sculpted portraits of Algerians, Africans, Chinese, and European types from the Mediterranean and various French provinces.

The busts exhibited in *Facing the Other* suggest the diversity of his represented world. Among the most distinguished are the *Chinese Man* and *Chinese Woman* (1853), family members of a Cantonese tea merchant who had settled in Paris. The models for the striking *Negro of the Sudan* and *Mulatto Woman, Priestess of the Festival of Beans* (1856) were celebrants at religious rites held in Algiers before Ramadan. Of the latter, he wrote: “*This woman was so deeply identified with her role that I looked in vain for some hint of life in that granite face, that mask of terrifying immobility which seemed fixed in contemplation of divine mysteries.*” His mission to Greece via Italy yielded, among other works, *A Neapolitan Woman from Abruzzi* (1859); *The Beautiful Gallinara* (1858), a young woman from Rome; and *Young Greek Woman* (1858-59).

#### ***ETHNOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHY***

The rapid development of ethnographic photography at mid-century paralleled Cordier’s rise as an ethnographic sculptor; indeed, photographs and sculpture were considered necessary and complementary elements of the new Anthropological Gallery of Paris’ Museum of Natural History. Daguerreotypes were made during photographic expeditions abroad or when foreigners visited Paris. These photographs became a necessary tool in the creative process that produced ethnographic sculpture. The Museum’s preparator was charged with taking photographs of visiting foreigners and eventually assembled 580 images, about which a French photography journal of the time wrote, “...if they weren’t precious scientific documents, they would be considered beautiful portraits.” In *Facing the Other*, some 30 of these images are presented on a continuous loop inside the exhibition.

#### ***POLYCHROMY***

Cordier was one of the pioneers of polychrome sculpture. The use of color in sculpture was a contentious mid-19th-century issue. The discovery of antique polychrome works (notably

Phidias's *Olympian Jupiter*) called into question the neoclassical insistence on the “purity” of white marble; such industrial innovations as galvanization, enameling, and silver-plating vastly widened the technical possibilities open to sculptors. Enlisting color in the service of art rather than gaudy novelty became a challenge.

Although other artists of his time experimented with polychromy, Cordier arguably exploited its possibilities most fully, and was certainly the first to bring together this expression of Second Empire opulence and the aesthetic and scientific aims of ethnography—the natural, even inescapable meeting of a new form, in which the hegemony of whiteness gives way to color, and the attempt to represent racially diverse manifestations of beauty.

Cordier's special interest in the natural polychromy of marble was abetted by his opportunities to visit, on various missions, recently re-opened quarries in Algeria and Greece. He particularly favored Algerian onyx-marble, a type of alabaster, and put its richly veined textures and varied hues (which included grayish, yellowish, dark brownish, and red tones) to good use.

The first polychrome works that Cordier exhibited—busts of the *Chinese Man* and *Chinese Woman* in the Salon of 1853—owed their color not to variegated marble but to technology: galvanization and enameling. His use of onyx-marble in sculptures of indigenous Algerians, four years later, represented a bolder stroke. Over time, the sculptor developed finesse in deploying a wide spectrum of materials and techniques—combining marbles of different colors, using their swirling patterns for the subjects' clothing, exploring the possibilities of patinas and metalwork, and even using semi-precious stones—to virtuoso effect.

The bronze *Capresse of the Colonies* (1861), for example, has in part been gilded and silvered by oxidization, and the sculpture is augmented by onyx-marble for the headdress and drapery. The synthesis of the entire range of Cordier's techniques: patinated, gilt, and enameled bronze, glass eye inlays, and more is found in the bust *Jewish Woman from Algiers* (1872). Her enameled bustier is fixed onto the block of red marble, which in turn is embedded in the onyx-marble. In one version of the *Negro of the Sudan* (1856) presented here, it appears that the onyx-marble turban was simply placed on the silvered-bronze head, which was in turn inserted into a slight indentation in a larger block of marble.

#### ***MULTIPLE EDITIONS***

Like other sculptors of his time, Cordier took advantage of recent technical advances that facilitated the reproduction of small-scale versions of his work, and thus their dissemination to new markets. Since the 1830s, sculpture reproduction techniques had allowed for the easy production of multiples and reductions. The three versions of *Chinese Man* and *Chinese Woman* on view here exemplify the phenomenon: one in enamel and gilt bronze, nearly identical to the pieces exhibited at the Salon of 1853; one in bronze; and a third in biscuit or hard-paste porcelain, executed in 1869 by the firm of Vion et Baury, Paris.

*Said Abdallah* and *African Venus* are seen here in bronze, in both full and reduced scale, and in the reduced-scale form of bronze and plaster masks. Such masks were found on the walls of several sculptors' studios, including that of Adolphe-Victor Geoffroy-Dechaume, who restored

the sculptures of Notre Dame de Paris and the Sainte Chapelle. They can be seen today at Chesterwood, the Stockbridge, Massachusetts studio of Daniel Chester French.

Of particular interest in this section of the exhibition is a plaster life-cast of Seïd Enkess, the Sudanese model for *Saïd Abdallah*, made a year before Cordier executed his bust. This provides the unusual opportunity to compare the person and the portrait, a century and a half after the act of creation.

### ***THE OFFICIAL CAREER***

Although his ethnographic work is of greatest interest and appeal to a post-modern audience, much of Cordier's output was typical of a Second Empire sculptor: portraits, private commissions, and public monuments.

Among his most notable achievements, the terracotta studies for *Atlantes* (about 1861) displayed here, were commissioned by Baron James de Rothschild for the gallery on the central hall of the Château de Ferrières. The strength and vigor of these terracotta studies provide rare testimony of Cordier's modeling skills. The final product combined onyx-marble and bronze to achieve a spectacular monumental effect.

Also to be seen in this section of the exhibition is a bronze medallion of Giuseppe Garibaldi (1870), one of Cordier's four sculptures of the hero of the Italian *Risorgimento*, and part of the massive fireplace for the grand foyer of the Paris Opera.

Late in his career, Cordier received one of his most important public commissions: the *Monument to Christopher Columbus* (1876) that was unveiled in Mexico City a year later. A small-scale version of silvered bronze on a base of Mexican onyx-marble, is displayed here. *Arab Woman* (1862), a candelabrum in human form, is a masterly synthesis of antique, baroque, and Oriental influences, acquired by the Empress Eugénie for the Chateau de Compiègne. Even the Egyptian ruler, Ismaïl Pasha posed for Cordier when he came to Paris. Cordier's final commission from Ismaïl remains on view in Cairo's Opera Square today. It is a regal equestrian statue dedicated to his father, Ibrahim Pasha, who ruled Egypt from 1789 to 1848.

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### **GENERAL INFORMATION**

The Dahesh Museum of Art is located at 580 Madison Avenue, between 56th and 57th Streets, in midtown Manhattan. Gallery hours: Tuesday through Sunday, 11 am – 6 pm, closed Monday and all legal holidays. Admission: \$9 adults, \$4 students and seniors (62+), free to Museum Members and children under 12. On the First Thursday of every month, admission to the Museum is free from 6 to 9 pm.

### **EXHIBITION CATALOGUE**

*Facing the Other: Charles Cordier, Ethnographic Sculptor* is accompanied by a richly illustrated 256-page catalogue, with essays on the artist and his work by Laure de Margerie,

archivist of sculpture at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Edouard Papet, curator of sculpture at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Christine Barthe, head of the photography collection of the Musée de l'Homme, Paris; and Maria Vigli, an art historian. There are 600 illustrations, including 200 color plates, enhanced by Laure de Margerie's unprecedented *catalogue raisonné*. The English-language version of the catalogue, made possible in part by the Isaacson-Draper Foundation, is published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., and is available at the Dahesh Museum of Art Shop or on-line at [museumshop@daheshmuseum.org](mailto:museumshop@daheshmuseum.org).

#### EXHIBITION PARTNERS

