



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

ERASTUS DOW PALMER (1817–1904)

Sappho

Plaster, 15 in. diameter

Modeled circa 1858

RECORDED: cf. *Catalogue of the Palmer Marbles, at the Hall Belonging to the Church of the Divine Unity*, exhib. cat. (Albany, New York: J. Munsell, 1856), p. 19 // cf. A Woltmann, “Ein amerikanischer Bildhauer,” *Recensionen & Mitteilungen über Bildende Kunst* 4 (1865), p. 314 // cf. Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life* (New York: G. P. Putman, 1867), p. 633 // cf. Helen Ely Richardson, “Erastus Dow Palmer: American Craftsman and Sculptor,” *New York History* 27 (July 1946), p. 327 // cf. J. Carson Webster, “A Check List of the Works of Erastus D. Palmer,” *Art Bulletin* 49 (June 1967), p. 147 fig. 6 illus. // cf. J. Carson Webster, *Erastus D. Palmer: Sculpture—Ideas* (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1983), pp. 27, 41, 100, 107, 111, 114, 265, 266, 170–73, 178 illus. plate 52, 179 illus. plate 53, 265–66, 278 // cf. Thayer Tolles, ed., *American Sculpture in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 1: *A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born before 1865* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), pp. 67 illus., 68

EX COLL: the artist; [possibly] to John Frederick Kensett, New York, 1858; private collection, New York; to [Post Road Gallery, Larchmont, New York]; to private collection, 2006 until the present

A key figure in the history of American sculpture of the mid-nineteenth century, Erastus Dow Palmer was a nonconformist who followed his own artistic path. While most of his fellow Neo-Classical sculptors, notably Horatio Greenough and Hiram Powers, studied and worked in Italy, Palmer was a self-taught artist who spent his entire career in Albany, New York. Honing his craft independently, Palmer developed his own version of Neo-Classicism, often imbuing his figures with a greater degree of naturalism as opposed to the consistently idealized productions of those who went abroad. In addition to exploring subjects from antiquity, Palmer also set himself apart from the mainstream by taking an interest in themes related to contemporary life. As summed up by the art collector and critic Henry T. Tuckerman, Palmer's art was characterized by "a progressive taste, the most individual conceptions, and an execution scrupulous in its refinements" (Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists* [New York: G. P. Putman, 1867], p. 356). Entering his studio was, as Tuckerman described it, a "magical process," as if "Albany was transformed to Florence."

The son of a carpenter and joiner, Palmer was born on a farm near Pompey, Onondaga County, New York, a small town near Syracuse. (The definitive study on Palmer remains J. Carson Webster's *Erastus D. Palmer: Sculpture—Ideas* [Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1983].) Endowed with a high degree of manual dexterity and a love of fine craftsmanship, he worked as a journeyman carpenter in locales such as Syracuse, Dunkirk, and Amsterdam before moving to Utica, where he established himself as a pattern maker and joiner. However, a turning point in Palmer's

career occurred in 1845, when, perusing a shop window, he saw a delicately cut shell cameo from Europe which so impressed him that, using a file from his toolbox, he made a carving of his wife, Mary Jane. After showing it to a local collector who encouraged him to follow his artistic inclinations, Palmer began cutting these tiny reliefs on a full-time basis, plying his trade as a *conchiglia* (shell artist) in and around Utica, Albany, and New York City.

By 1848, having produced more than two hundred cameo portraits, Palmer was suffering from eye strain. In order to alleviate his condition, and desirous of broadening his commissions, he transitioned to modeling larger relief sculptures, a form of creative expression that became a specialty he would pursue throughout his career—to the extent that almost half of Palmer’s oeuvre would consist of sculptures in relief. He also relocated to Albany, a flourishing industrial city with a population of affluent citizens who could afford to buy art. In 1850, Palmer turned his attention to sculptures in the round, the first of which was *The Infant Ceres* (1849–50), a portrait of his two-year-old daughter, Fanny, which, upon its successful debut at the National Academy of Design in New York in 1851, marked the beginning of his career as a professional sculptor.

Palmer exhibited at the National Academy again in 1852 and 1853, after which he stopped participating, concerned that sculpture was typically relegated to out-of-the-way rooms with poor lighting. Writing in early January 1855 to the editors of the *Crayon*, a leading art journal, Palmer suggested that he might have to find another venue in New York for his work if no improvements, namely a “respectable room and fine sky light,” were made. (Palmer’s letter, written to William J. Stillman and John Durand on January 8, 1855, is reprinted in Webster, p. 263.) Palmer’s decision to withhold his work from public display did not go unheeded by his supporters: in November 1856, at

the invitation of a group of distinguished friends and fellow artists that included the painters Asher B. Durand, Frederic Edwin Church, and Daniel Huntington, Palmer organized an exhibition of his work at the Church of the Divine Unity, at 548 Broadway, which was on view from December 1856 to April 1857. Dubbed the “Palmer Marbles,” the twelve sculptures that comprised the exhibit included *Indian Girl* or *The Dawn of Christianity* (1853–56), a depiction of a semi-nude woman in which Palmer explored the theme of Christian morality in relation to America’s Native Americans, as well as earlier pieces such as *The Infant Ceres*. In view of his expertise in relief sculpture, it’s not surprising that Palmer also chose to exhibit his recently modeled relief of Sappho (c. 630–570 BCE), the legendary archaic Greek poet.

One of the greatest and most prolific lyric poets of her day, Sappho was born on the Greek island of Lesbos. Her evocative verse, written in the Aeolic Greek dialect, focused on the intense emotions stimulated by love and erotic desire, while her elegant style, as revealed in the few extant works to have survived, such as “Ode to Aphrodite,” prompted Plato to call her the “Tenth Muse.” Although celebrated for her poetry, artistic interest in Sappho revolved around an incident in her life—a well-known but tragic story, thought today to be false, that she jumped to her death off a cliff when her love was spurned by a young ferryman named Phaeon. (Ironically, Sappho was also associated with love between women, hence the word “sapphic,” which refers to lesbianism, which in turn relates to the place of Sappho’s birth.) During the nineteenth century, Sappho as the victim of unrequited love became a popular motif for many artists of the day, among them American sculptors such as William Wetmore Story and Thomas Crawford, who were very much aware of the romantic appeal of the subject to Victorian audiences.

Palmer's enthusiasm for the legend of Sappho was shared by Wendell L'Amoreux (1825–1907), who wrote a twenty-three-line poem on the incident for the catalogue of Palmer's 1856 exhibition. A Professor of Modern Languages and Assistant Professor of Belles-Lettres at Union College in Schenectady, New York, L'Amoreux effectively captured Sappho's suffering and loss of hope in his composition, especially the passage in which she declared (L'A., "For Palmer's Alt-Relief," in *Catalogue of the Palmer Marbles, at the Hall Belonging to the Church of the Divine Unity*, exhib. cat. [Albany, New York: J. Munsell, 1856], p. 19; for L'Amoreux, see Sidney G. Ashmore, "Professor Wendell Lamoroux," *Union University Quarterly* 4 [May 1907], pp. 43–49):

I loved him—wreaked my passion's utmost prayer
 Upon his ear—and—he spurned it all!
 Dark! Dead! All, all is dark and cold and dead!
 The sunshine is a gloom to me—the front
 Of far Cyllene smiles no longer now,
 As when I lay and steeped the purple hours
 In dreams of Phaon's love.

Palmer expressed his own interest in translating the psychology of the broken-hearted poet into stone in a missive written to the *Crayon* on December 10, 1855, wherein he described his recently completed work as an "alto-basso-relievo—the head being in full relief while the bust is quite low." (Reprinted in Webster, p. 265. "Alto-Basso" is a nineteenth-century term for high relief.) "The subject," he said, "is Sappho.... Let me know what the Crayon thinks of Sappho as she stands contemplating vacancy, with her hair and drapery moved by the sighing winds of Lesbos, and a heart over-flowing with grief from neglected love" (Webster, pp. 265–66).

As revealed by this rare plaster version, Palmer conceived Sappho as a comely young woman wearing an alluring low-cut corselet, her hair covered by a cloak that curves gently around her right

shoulder. (Palmer created numerous replicas of Sappho, both in marble and plaster. Examples of the marble version can be found in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York [modeled 1855; carved 1861] and at the Albany Institute of History and Art [1856]. The Albany Institute also owns five plasters. Versions in plaster can also be found at the Phoenix Art Museum [1858] and the Olana State Historic Site in Hudson, New York [1856]). Sappho's head is turned downwards and to the side as, faced with a future without love, she "contemplates vacancy" and ponders her fate. To be sure, rather than overtly displaying her inner anguish, Palmer's heroine exudes an aura of quiet introspection that is very much in keeping with Neo-Classicism's emphasis on calm and restraint.

Palmer's interpretation of Sappho attracted the attention of many collectors of his milieu, among them the aforementioned Frederic Edwin Church and their friend and fellow painter, John Frederick Kensett, both of whom owned plaster versions. A close friend of Palmer's, Church taught the sculptor's son, the painter Walter Launt Palmer [1854–1932], the rudiments of landscape painting. Church's *Sappho* is in the collection at Olana. Kensett acquired his plaster from Palmer in the spring of 1858 [see Webster, p. 171]. It has been suggested that his cast of *Sappho*, formerly in a collection in New York City, is the present work. (See correspondence in Hirschl & Adler Galleries archives.) Later admirers of *Sappho* included the sculptor Helen Ely Richardson, who deemed it an "unusual" piece that underscored the "proficiency [Palmer] was to attain in the much admired 'Alto-Basso,'" exemplifying, in particular, his "usual sensitive feeling for line and pleasing composition" (Helen Ely Richardson, "Erastus Dow Palmer: American Craftsman and Sculptor," *New York History* 7 [July 1946], p. 327. Richardson was writing in reference to the plaster version then owned by Dr. T. Wood Clark of Utica, New York.) To be sure, on the basis of works such as *Sappho*—notable for its

simple design, graceful linearity, and rhythmic design—Palmer came to be known as one of the finest exponents of bas-relief sculpture of his generation. As William H. Gerdtz has pointed out, “The most significant expression, as well as development, in American neoclassic relief sculpture took place not in Florence or Rome but in the Albany studio of Erastus Dow Palmer” (William H. Gerdtz, “The Neoclassic Relief,” in Thayer Tolles, ed., *Perspectives on America Sculpture before 1925* [New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003], p. 15).

Critics and the public responded favorably to Palmer’s 1856 exhibition, a writer for the *Crayon* referring to it as “one of the most interesting and satisfactory [exhibitions] of the day,” while a commentator at *The Albion* declared: “It must be a very dull soul that could step from the Vanity Fair of Broadway into this Exhibition, and not be possessed with something of the charm that pervades it” (as quoted in Webster, p. 27; “Fine Arts. The Palmer Marbles,” *The Albion*, December 18 [i.e. 13], 1856, p. 597). Suffice to say, the show was vital in securing Palmer’s position as a leading American sculptor: a home-grown talent who combined technical virtuosity with aesthetic originality. Palmer was no doubt encouraged by the success of the exhibit when, in 1857, he began modeling *The White Captive* (1858–59), his most acclaimed work. An American analogue to Powers’s *Greek Slave* (1841–43; 1846), *The White Captive* was the one of first nude portrayals of a female subject produced in the United States and, in the fleshiness of the figure, a prime example of Palmer’s preference for a more individualized treatment of the human form. His inventiveness also manifested itself in later works such as *Peace in Bondage* (1863), a poignant relief of a semi-nude angel, her hands bound behind her, which served as Palmer’s personal response to the Civil War.

In addition to his high standing in New York art circles, Palmer (whose studio served as a training

ground for aspiring sculptors such as Jonathan Scott Hartley and Charles Calverley) was considered a celebrity in Albany, recognized by locals who would exclaim: “There goes Palmer, the sculptor,” as he strolled by (Will H. Low, *A Painter’s Progress* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910], p. 34). He was at the height of his fame during the 1850s and 1860s, during which time photographic prints of his work were exhibited and sold in both the United States and Europe—a major coup for an American artist who had never been abroad. Certainly, Palmer was proud of his Yankee heritage and the fact that he achieved renown without the benefits of foreign training. He felt no need to cross the Atlantic until 1873, when he traveled to Paris to model his portrait of *Robert R. Livingston* (1874; Statuary Hall, U.S. Capitol) which, conforming to the changing tastes of the time, was cast in bronze. During his later years, Palmer concentrated on portraits and relief sculptures. Elected a fellow of the National Sculpture Society in 1896, he died in Albany on March 9, 1904.

The present example of *Sappho* retains its original circular frame of a style and treatment that Palmer used regularly for his tondo reliefs. The cove is painted in a warm matte white tone to emulate the color of the plaster, and is set off from the relief by a gilded fillet.