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## Sculpture, Chains, and the Armstrong Gun: John Bell's *American Slave*

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Abstract:

This article contends that John Bell's *American Slave* was made as an abolitionist response to Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave*. Bell's statue presented a critique of Powers, and aimed to demonstrate the limits of ideal sculpture in addressing contemporary ethical questions. Like *The Greek Slave*, Bell's statue is a transatlantic object, and one that embodies the complexity and contradictions of Anglo-American culture.

## Sculpture, Chains, and the Armstrong Gun: John Bell's *American Slave*

by Michael Hatt

Discussion of *The Greek Slave* by Hiram Powers (1805–73) has routinely cited John Tenniel's famous caricature *The Virginian Slave* (fig. 1), published in *Punch* in 1851 as the “fitting companion” to Powers's statue. [1] Tenniel's image made explicit the scandal of American slavery and accused Powers, and by extension the United States, of disavowing the reality of contemporary slavery in its imagined pairing with *The Greek Slave*. What has rarely been acknowledged is that a version of this fitting companion was, in fact, produced: *The American Slave* (fig. 2) by John Bell (1811–95). Bell's statue, first shown as *A Daughter of Eve—A Scene on the Shore of the Atlantic* in plaster at the Royal Academy in 1853, represents a young woman on the shore of Africa, chained and awaiting transportation to the Americas. The title was changed for the London International Exhibition in 1862, in response to the American Civil War. The statue shares the critical politics of *Punch*, which regularly and forcefully attacked the institution of slavery in the United States, and was intended, like the cartoon, to remind viewers of what *The Greek Slave* hid from view.



Fig. 1, John Tenniel, *The Virginian Slave*, *Intended as a Companion to Power's* [sic] 'Greek Slave', *Punch* 20, June 7, 1851: 236. [\[larger image\]](#)

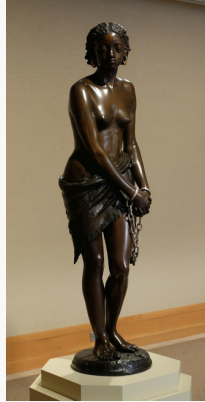


Fig. 2, John Bell, *The American Slave [A Daughter of Eve]*, ca. 1862. Bronze patinated electrotype with silver and gold plating. The Armstrong Collection, National Trust, Cragside, Rothbury, Northumberland. Courtesy of the National Trust. Photograph by Nick Mead, 2014. [\[larger image\]](#)

Indeed, Bell modeled his response to Powers explicitly on Tenniel's satire, as is evident from the pose, the position of the arms and hands, and the drapery. Of course, in line with the demands of sculptural aesthetics, Bell makes his slave both beautiful and perhaps eroticised in contrast to Tenniel's cartoon figure. As we shall see, there are questions to be asked about race politics, the market, and the erotic, but there can be no doubt that *The American Slave* is a critique of Powers and of American slavery. Moreover, I want to suggest, somewhat speculatively, that Bell's response addresses the moral limits of ideal sculpture in the modern world. His work implicitly makes the claim that slavery cannot be idealized; that the ideal and the allegorical hide the true horrors of slavery, and so a different sculptural mode is required—one that is more realist and literal—if a morally forceful and responsible representation is to be made. *The American Slave* is concerned with both the ethics of slavery and the ethics of sculpture.

Another abolitionist cartoon from *Punch*, *The Shadow of English Liberty in America*, published in 1850, provides a starting point for my argument (fig. 3). An allegorical statue of Liberty, the word at the very root of America's self-image, casts the shadow of a shackled slave. The shadow reveals what has been hidden in the rhetoric of liberty in America, and its deformation of this English virtue. The cartoon is also an image of allegory or ideal sculpture itself. Typical of much criticism of allegorical sculpture in Victorian Britain, it highlights the ways in which such sculpture seemed to hide the contradictions and complexities of contemporary life. The *Punch* cartoon offers an explicitly political version of this, suggesting that allegory, rather than revealing truth, obscures it. This is the root of Bell's response to Powers. He aims to replace the obfuscatory allegory of *The Greek Slave* with the dark shadow cast by ideal marble.



Fig. 3, Richard Doyle, *The Shadow of English Liberty in America*, *Punch* 19, May 11, 1850: 190. [\[larger image\]](#)

### Bell and Abolitionism

There is some documentary evidence to link Bell to abolitionism. A notice in the *Manchester Guardian* in August 1853 advertised the display of *A Daughter of Eve* at Grundy's gallery in Exchange Street, and made it clear to readers that they had the opportunity to view an abolitionist work.<sup>[2]</sup> This was described as a life-size bronze cast by Elkington and Company, although it may have been an electrotype. The article describes the statue as “the product of genius, expressing its sympathies for the negro race, in slavery—sympathies which Mr. Bell has felt for years.” It then goes on to quote Bell: “The poor slave girl, represented on the bronze, does not struggle with her fate; but that very resignation should plead the more against the injustice and degradation of that position to which the colour of her skin condemns her. . . . The voice, the pen, and the brush have been energetic in advocating the rights of the oppressed race. A sculptor hopes that his art also may aid in directing a sustained attention to the greatest injustice in the world.”<sup>[3]</sup> To emphasize the antislavery force of the statue, the writer claimed that it had been admired by none other than Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Sutherland-Leveson-Gower, the Duchess of Sutherland, an aristocratic abolitionist whom Mrs. Stowe visited in 1853.

While the statue demonstrates Bell's sympathy for the cause, there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that he had closer connections to abolitionist circles. Bell created monuments to some of the major figures in British abolitionism. In 1848, he made a memorial bust of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton for the Anglican Cathedral in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Buxton was the man who took the 1833 Abolition of Slavery Act through Parliament, which resulted in abolition the following year. Bell raised memorials to Samuel Gurney, in 1860 in Norwich and in 1861 in East London, as well as a memorial bust for Gurney, Liberia, the town that bore his name. Gurney was a banker who was part of Buxton's circle; indeed, Buxton married Gurney's sister Hannah, and Gurney himself worked extensively both for abolitionism and in prison reform (his sister was the most famous of all prison reformers, Elizabeth Fry). To commemorate Gurney, Bell designed two obelisks. He had a scholarly interest in the obelisk, and wrote important essays on its historical roots and meanings in order to support his own experiments with the form.<sup>[4]</sup> But more pertinent is that these obelisks are drinking fountains. In 1859, Gurney founded the Metropolitan Free Drinking Fountain Association, which aimed to

provide clean water both as an alternative to the pub and the gin shop, and in response to the filthiness of the Thames and outbreaks of cholera. The public drinking fountain, the most important product of the temperance movement, integrated philanthropy and evangelism. Water also had an important symbolic function, and drinking fountains were made to commemorate other abolitionists, including Buxton. Purity of water and purity of spirit went hand in hand in Christian reformist circles. Bell was also commissioned to make a drinking fountain for Kew Gardens by Joseph Hooker, the director. There is, again, a connection to the other abolitionist figures: Hooker was the grandson of Dawson Turner, whose father, James Turner, was the head of Gurney's bank.

Why did Bell receive these commissions to commemorate these intimates? Of course, he was a major sculptor, and so it might have been because of his reputation. The success of one commission may have led to his being recommended by one patron to the next. But there is another connection to this network. Buxton, Gurney, and Turner were all Norfolk men and devout nonconformists. Bell was also born and raised in Norfolk, not far from Great Yarmouth, an important center for nonconformism and, consequently, for social reform and radical politics. Dawson Turner was certainly a familiar acquaintance, if not a friend. A letter from Bell to Turner in 1837 sends regrets at his being unable to dine with him, and another from 1845 asks Turner to act on his behalf in order to win Bell the commission for a testimonial to Buxton—presumably the bust for the cathedral in Freetown.<sup>[5]</sup> Similarly, whether or not Bell knew Gurney through antislavery activism, he certainly knew him through the Metropolitan Drinking Fountain Association. They attended association meetings, and Bell gave a paper on “Art, Associated with Drinking Fountains” at a *conversazione* organized by the association at Saint James's Hall in July 1860.<sup>[6]</sup>

However closely or distantly Bell was connected to this circle, there is no doubting his commitment to abolition in *The American Slave*. Similarly, there is no doubting the Christian roots of his politics. He was a devout man who made many religious works throughout his career. When the plaster of *The American Slave* was first shown at the Royal Academy in 1853, its title was *A Daughter of Eve—A Scene on the Shore of the Atlantic*. The title alludes to the claim for monogenesis, that all humans share a common ancestry, as described in the book of Genesis. For Bell, as for many abolitionists, the antislavery cause was not founded on a rational or philosophical basis, but on biblical authority: the ancestry shared by all humans is Adam and Eve. Bell himself remarked of his statue, “a Negress and yet a sister is here represented.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Of course, Christianity is also central to *The Greek Slave*, both its narrative and the ways in which it could serve as a political symbol. This is evident in a mid-nineteenth-century Rockingham pitcher in the collection of Yale University Art Gallery. On one side is a relief of *The Greek Slave* (fig. 4); on the other, Powers's *Eve Tempted* (fig. 5). Here are innocence and experience, the fall and redemption, Eve and a daughter of Eve, the creation of sin and the battle to overcome it. The pitcher takes the image of a Christian woman whose faith enables her to transcend evil and makes a biblical connection, as if Eve's sin were redeemed. The pitcher emphasizes the Christian message of the statue and, as would be appropriate for a domestic object, its connotations for conceptions of woman and femininity, rather than the more sensational thematics of slavery and sexual violence.



Fig. 4, Pitcher with decoration after Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* and *Eve Tempted*, ca. 1853. Earthenware with Rockingham glaze. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 5, Pitcher with decoration after Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* and *Eve Tempted*, ca. 1853. Earthenware with Rockingham glaze. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. [\[larger image\]](#)

However, in terms of the statues themselves, as opposed to their use and reinvention, there is a marked difference in their relationship to Christianity. In *The Greek Slave* it is part of the subject; it is what allows the enslaved woman to transcend the physical circumstances of her situation. The inclusion of the cross, so frequently mentioned in the nineteenth century, as in contemporary scholarship, refers to the faith that keeps the young woman pure, and which protects her. In *The American Slave*, Christianity is not represented as a dream of posthumous salvation, but is instead the motivation for action to end enslavement. Christianity may save the Greek slave's soul for an afterlife, but in Bell's world it is what frees enslaved people in this one.

### **Idealism and Realism**

This question of idea and action, and its relationship to the ideal and realism in sculpture, is part of what distinguishes the two statues conceptually. Indeed, the basis of the comparison between Powers and Bell is immediately apparent. They are, of course, very different from each other visually, not least in the choices of marble and bronze. Powers's white marble

represents purity and innocence as well as the white skin of the young woman, both her racial and her moral status. The bronze of the American slave does not share this double meaning. This is less to do with Bell's intentions than with conceptions of skin. In the racialized representational schemas of the nineteenth century (and beyond), white skin is transparent, and black skin is opaque. A white person represented in bronze retains his or her white identity, while the material becomes literalized when the black body is represented, as if that blackness provides the definitive meaning of the person.<sup>[8]</sup> This curious asymmetry whereby skin color becomes the defining feature of, say, an African person, but not of a white American, is rooted in an implicit idea that whiteness can be metaphysical, while blackness is irredeemably physical. This racist separation of idea and matter might find an analogy in the relations between the ideal and realism. But rather than signifying the deficiencies of his African woman, Bell uses realism to mount his moral challenge to Powers. While the ideal, with its perfect surface and transcendent ambitions, hedges its bets, Bell's realism insists that pain and actuality must replace calm and fantasy. This is not to suggest that *The American Slave* is not a fiction of sorts, but Bell clearly aimed to counter the appealing fantasy of the Ottoman slave market with a reminder of the brutal reality of the African slave trade.

The ideal represents the perfect blend of the sensuous and the spirit. It is a body suffused with selfhood; or, as in *The Greek Slave*, a body which suggests selfhood can transcend the worldly. What does it mean to use this conceit to represent slavery? What are the moral consequences of allegorizing slavery? After all, the slave body is the very opposite of the ideal. Under slavery, selfhood is at odds with the body in terms of agency, ownership, behavior, and use. This is the moral core of Bell's response to Powers. While *The Greek Slave* represents a woman at one with her body, and, indeed, the idealism representing that unity, *The American Slave* is a woman who is separated not only from her culture and home but also from her body, her self-possession. Hence the downcast face with its painful expression and more individualized physiognomy, unlike the generic and serene countenance of *The Greek Slave* (fig. 6); the literal nature of the dress, which is completely invented, but designed to connote an actual culture; the very different canon of proportions, which does not conform to the protocols of the ideal nude as Powers's statue does; and the details showing the shore on which she stands waiting to be transported. This is what the ideal must suppress; this is the dark shadow it unwittingly casts.



Fig. 6, Detail of face, John Bell, *The American Slave [A Daughter of Eve]*, ca. 1862. Bronze patinated electrotypage with silver and gold plating. The Armstrong Collection, National Trust, Craggside, Rothbury, Northumberland. Courtesy of the National Trust. Photograph by Nick Mead, 2014. [\[larger image\]](#)

Of course, the aesthetic protocols of Victorian sculpture meant that there were limits even in realism. The reality of the slave body deformed by labor, with its scarred back, broken limbs, and sores made by shackles: none of this could be represented. Bell's sentimental vignette works within aesthetic limits. The presentation of the body awaiting transportation allows a beautiful figure to be shown; and this, in turn, has a terrible proleptic force, in that the viewer has to confront the fate of this young woman, and of her journey through the perilous middle passage and into a life of bondage and violence or death.

The American and Greek slaves are not only examples of how sculpture can evoke narrative time. Both statues look back to the recent past. *The Greek Slave*, of course, remembers the Greek War of Independence, fought between 1821 and 1832, thus displacing contemporary slavery or, at best, allegorizing it. *The American Slave* may also be a historical subject of sorts. The transatlantic slave trade had been abolished in 1807, and so Bell's statue might also be looking back to an earlier decade. However, African people were still transported, illegally, given the demand for slave labor in the Americas. Whether or not Bell wanted to signal the illegal perpetuation of transatlantic slavery, the point is that the woman represented, even if she had been transported in her youth, would still be an American slave in the present.

Nevertheless, while there is a sincere abolitionist and moral purpose to *The American Slave*, Bell clearly saw the success of *The Greek Slave* as something to be emulated. He was, after all, a canny businessman, with a keen eye for the market and the possibilities of new manufacturing technology for the modern sculptor's career. Bell represents the highly productive relationship between art and industry in Victorian Britain, as is evidenced by his collaborations with the major manufacturing firms producing sculpture in different media for a larger audience.<sup>[9]</sup> Simultaneously riding two bandwagons—the pathetic female slave and the economic possibilities of manufacture—Bell modeled a number of slave figures including *The Octoroon* (1868) and *The Abyssinian Slave* (1868; fig. 7), as well as other chained female figures such as *Andromeda* (1851). These rather complicate the moral argument of Bell's abolitionism. *The Abyssinian Slave*, for instance, which was produced by Minton and Company in Parian ware, is clearly a variation on *The American Slave*. (Minton, of course, also produced *The Greek Slave* in Parian, and so, as with the full-size statues, Bell exploited Powers's success.) The identical pose and proportions suggest the use of the same molds for ceramic figurines of both slaves, indicating that Minton and Bell were thinking economically and practically, using one model to generate two different Parian figures, a useful strategy for both the sculptor and the manufacturer.



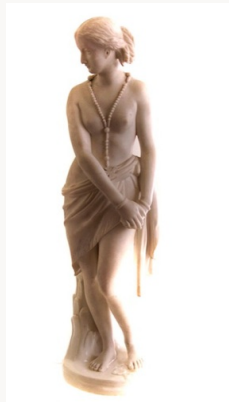


Fig. 7, John Bell, *The Abyssinian Slave*, 1868. Parian ware. Sold by Special Auction Services, Newbury, Berkshire, May 5, 2015, lot 0443, <http://specialauctionservices.com/large/ma050515/lot0443.html>.

[\[larger image\]](#)

Nevertheless, Bell recycled the slave figure to protest a new political scandal. *The Abyssinian Slave* was produced at a time when, following the abolition of transatlantic slavery and the end of the American Civil War, the British became more concerned with slavery on the east coast of Africa. While Britain had made efforts to suppress the slave trade around the Red Sea for some decades, this campaign intensified in the 1860s.<sup>[10]</sup> Popular interest is evident not only in the many articles that appeared in the periodical press, but in the publishing of numerous memoirs detailing travels and adventures undertaken in the antislavery cause.<sup>[11]</sup> Abyssinian slaves were much discussed as part of this particular market. In the Rede Lecture at the University of Cambridge in 1874, Sir Samuel White Baker, the explorer and abolitionist, who had been active in the suppression of the slave trade in Egypt, explained that female slaves were divided into three categories: Circassians, the most expensive; Abyssinians; and black Africans, the cheapest. He comments of the Abyssinians, who were much in demand in Egypt and Sudan, that “[they] are remarkably pretty, with large eyes and delicately shaped features.”<sup>[12]</sup> We can recognize here the figure Bell represents in his sculpture, characterized by a mix of erotic allure and moral outrage.

*The Abyssinian Slave* was also topical in a more direct way. The year of its production, 1868, was also the year of the British Expedition to Abyssinia.<sup>[13]</sup> The expedition against the Ethiopian Empire was made to free British hostages, both missionaries and government representatives, including the consul, Captain Charles Duncan Cameron, who had been imprisoned by Emperor Tewodros II in 1863. The background is extremely complicated, but, in brief, the reason Tewodros took the captives is this: Tewodros sent a letter to Queen Victoria requesting assistance against the Egyptians.<sup>[14]</sup> For various reasons, the letter was not delivered, but was simply filed away in the Foreign Office. Not only was Britain relying increasingly on Egyptian cotton for its mills, given the disruption caused by the American Civil War, but also Egypt was an important buffer against Russia and, therefore, useful in warding off threats to India. In order to gain British attention, Tewodros imprisoned Cameron and the others and, after some years of wavering, the expedition was launched, freed the hostages, and ended with the bombardment and destruction of Magdala, the Abyssinian capital. These events were not

directly related to the question of slavery. Indeed, Tewedros was opposed to slavery, and, as K. V. Ram has argued, the British were less concerned with slavery inside Abyssinia than with the circulation of Abyssinian slaves around the Red Sea.<sup>[15]</sup> Nevertheless, one might speculate that Bell's choice of subject not only permitted a recycling of the popular figure of the slave, but also had a topicality that enhanced its marketability.

As for the erotic allure of the slave body in Bell's work, this is exemplified by *The Octoroon*. This statue is typical of the literary convention of the beautiful but tragic dissembling figure, here modeled with a highly marketable sexuality and capitalizing on novels, plays, and other forms of popular culture. As Joseph Roach has remarked, "she repines unresistingly in the almost ornamental chains of her bondage."<sup>[16]</sup> Referring to the Victorian notion of uncoiffed hair as a sign of female sexuality, Roach adds: "Like Rapunzel, she sweetly, and very carefully, lets down her hair."<sup>[17]</sup> While *The American Slave* is unmarked by such an explicit eroticism, her exposed body offers a number of spectatorial possibilities. In these works, slavery integrates politics and the erotic, outrage and pleasure—just, perhaps, as Powers's *Greek Slave* does. I made much of these ironies in the catalogue to the exhibition *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901* (2014), and they cannot be ignored.<sup>[18]</sup> Nonetheless, if the eroticism of these figures is problematic for twenty-first century eyes, this does not nullify the moral force of *The American Slave*; rather, this should remind us of the historical circumstances in which this moral challenge was made. Indeed, Bell's thinking about manufacture, just like his thinking about slavery, was by no means only driven by financial concerns; it was ethically grounded.

The silver chains are indicative of this. One might see these as part of a general concern for patination, for mixed-medium sculpture, or for visual novelty. Certainly, the chains are a result of the possibilities opened up by collaboration with industry. But the brightness and distinctiveness of the chains make it clear that these are real chains. They fall loose, as if naturally, pinned to the body beneath to retain an apparently arbitrary arrangement, in contrast to the fixed, decorative regularity of the represented chains in Powers's marble (figs. 8, 9). The startling contrast of the silver-plated chains against the color of the woman's skin makes them the most noticeable feature of the statue. They stand too in ironic contrast to the earrings, objects supposedly manufactured in the woman's own culture. Manufactured metal objects thus represent estrangement and belonging.

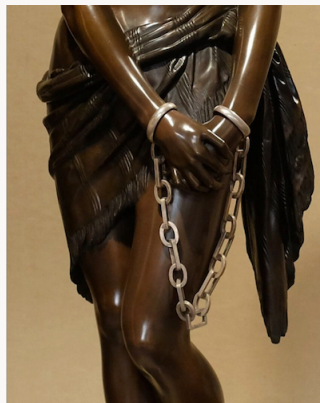


Fig. 8, Detail of chains, John Bell, *The American Slave* [*A Daughter of Eve*], ca. 1862. Bronze patinated electrotypes with silver and gold plating. The Armstrong Collection, National Trust, Cragside, Rothbury, Northumberland. Courtesy of the National Trust. Photograph by Nick Mead, 2014. [\[larger image\]](#)

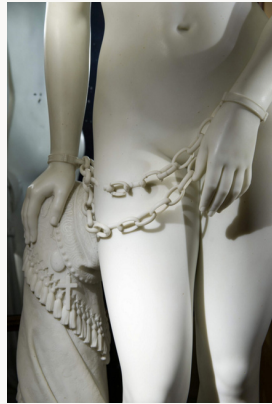


Fig. 9, Detail of chains, Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*, 1844. Marble. Raby Castle, Staindrop, County Durham. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Rt. Hon. Lord Barnard, Raby Castle. [\[larger image\]](#)

This is also about the irony of luxury. The slave's chains are to be contrasted not only with her jewelry, but also with other kinds of silver objects, the highly wrought and beautiful objects produced for expanding markets in the Victorian empire. Even if Bell's delicate silvered chains are far from what shackles actually looked like, their fineness and shine reinforce this sense of fine work, of tasteful metal artistry. The use of silver may also be an allusion to value, to the transformation of the woman's value from human to economic terms, as goods. In *Sculpture Victorious*, Martina Droth's installation created a sight line from the slave's chains to the enormous *Eglinton Trophy* (1842, silver-plated copper and silver on a wood base, property of the Earl of Eglinton & Winton, on loan to North Ayrshire Council, Irvine, Scotland), one of the finest silver testimonials of the nineteenth century, alerting the visitor both to the connection between luxury silverware and slave shackles, and to the creation and transformation of value.

The chains further alert us to the fact that the woman herself is a manufactured object. A cartoon titled *A Sample of American Manufacture* appeared in *Punch* in 1851 (fig. 10). Like *The Virginian Slave*, this image was part of *Punch*'s campaign against slavery. It came at the end of an article called "America in Crystal," which attacked the image of American manufacture and the erasure of slave labor in the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations at London's Crystal Palace. It is in this article that *Punch* famously asked: "Why not have sent some choice specimens of slaves? We have the Greek Captive in dead stone—why not the Virginian slave in living ebony?"<sup>[19]</sup> The cartoon itself illustrates a similarly satirical suggestion made by the writer: "Let America hire a black or two to stand in manacles, an American manufacture, protected by the American eagle,"<sup>[20]</sup> The image represents the manacles on slave limbs, while an American eagle holding a whip "protects" them. The notion of protection, typical of *Punch*'s bitterly ironic observations, alludes to the belief widely held by apologists for slavery that slaves needed to be protected from their own savage nature by the discipline of white civilization. But the image does much more. It makes clear that the slaves are not just the bodies that manufacture the goods of America, or "Slaveownia" (the name *Punch* suggested for the American South). The slaves themselves are manufactures, made under the auspices of the American eagle, the "choice specimens" that a genuine display of American goods would include. The woman in Bell's sculpture is set to undergo this transformation. The figure here is an *African* woman who becomes an *American* slave. Her identity is changed as she crosses the

Atlantic, transformed by the hideous alchemy of the slave trade from a person in her own culture to a chattel for Slaveownia. The statue also alludes to the distinction between slavery in America and free wage labor in Britain. Anyone who visited Elkington's manufactory in Birmingham, as many did, would have witnessed a moral and rather well-paid organization of labor.<sup>[21]</sup> While Bell's statue *represents* slavery, the object *embodies* the alternative.



Fig. 10, "Sample of American Manufacture", *Punch* 20, May 24, 1851: 209. [\[larger image\]](#)

### Bell and America

Not only is America the implicit subject of this statue, but also it features heavily in Bell's output. He made the monumental statue *California* (1854, destroyed) for the Sydenham Crystal Palace and, most famously, sculpted the group *America*, one of the four continents at the corners of the Albert Memorial (1864–69; fig. 11). Here America on her bison leads Canada and the United States, with Mexico in an Aztec headdress idling to one side and a generic South American at the rear of the plinth. What is missing from the group is the African American presence. This omission should not be surprising. Because the monument is a celebration of the world represented at the Crystal Palace, a world at the center of which Albert sits with the Great Exhibition's catalogue in hand, the kinds of moral and political questions posed by the writers and cartoonists of *Punch* would not have been welcome. As has been pointed out by Colin Cunningham, Bell had to grapple here with the politics of Anglo-American relations.<sup>[22]</sup> But this is another cast shadow, and points to the way in which the Anglo-Saxon ideal, which Bell celebrated in the group, was compromised by slavery for him. One might think of *The American Slave* as the absent figure here. Each continental allegory ties peoples to places, the figures firmly positioned on their pedestals. But the mobility of the slave body, shipped from one corner of the world to another, cannot be represented in such a stable conception of racial and geographical divisions. The monument summarizes in plastic form the white politics of this world, with its racial and cultural hierarchies, and its British imperial fulcrum.



Fig. 11, John Bell, *America*, 1864–69. Campanella marble. Albert Memorial, London. [\[larger image\]](#)

However, the transatlantic whiteness embodied in the Albert Memorial was by no means anathema to Bell. In 1859, he proposed a pair of androsphinxes for the termini of the transatlantic telegraph, and made a plaster model (fig. 12). Bell was something of a scholar, and just as he researched and discussed the obelisk in historical and theoretical ways, he was deeply immersed in the history of other monumental forms, including sphinxes, always designing his own works with an acute sense of their relationship to history. In March 1859, he read a paper at the Royal Institute of British Architects titled “On the Composite Vital Forms and Creations of Art, in Relation to Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, and Decoration, and as Symbols.”<sup>[23]</sup> In this talk, Bell explored the history of the androsphinx form, emphasising its role in Assyria and Egypt as the guardian of the entrances to sacred spaces. The event ended with the presentation of this plaster model, designed to guard the sacred space of telegraphy, for the collection of the institute.



Fig. 12, John Bell, *A Winged Leonine Androsphinx*, 1859. Plaster model. Location unknown. [\[larger image\]](#)

Just as Anglo-American culture was exemplified by the telegraph cable, so Bell pointed out that the androsphinx was a synthetic image of the Anglo-Saxon: “I would venture to suggest as an application to modern times, that as Britain has her lion, and America her eagle, and as both nations possess great power, intellectual and physical, and widespread influence rapidly disseminated—the leonine, eagle-winged Androsphinx, shown in the model before us, might

form a not inapt heraldic symbol of the Anglo-Saxon race.”<sup>[24]</sup> The eagle is no longer the guardian of Slaveownia, but Britain's other half in racial and cultural unity. In a lecture given a year later at the Society of Arts, “The Art-Treatment of Granitic Surfaces,” Bell mentioned his design again, reiterating that these two androsphinxes, holding “each end of the magic chain” of the transatlantic telegraph, were “emblems of the character and energies of the two great sections of the Anglo-saxon race.” His reason for introducing this scheme into a talk about granite surfaces was that he had imagined that, on the base of the sculptures, would be incised “two hands stretching across the waters, and grasping each other in amity over the waves—symbol of that thorough cordiality which should exist between Britons and Americans, and of which the Transatlantic Telegraph would be so strong a bond—a bond indeed which all lovers of what is good and great, Christian and progressive, must earnestly hope to see again ratified and restored, and permanently established across the deep blue waves of the Atlantic.”<sup>[25]</sup> What this symbol looked like is evident in Bell's design for a proposed Transatlantic Telegraph Medal sketched in a letter of 1866 to Leonard C. Wyon (fig. 13). The sketch shows hands clasped across the Atlantic as Bell described in his lecture, and offers the sense of the telegraph as a physical, almost tactile relationship between Anglo-Saxons on either side of the ocean. The telegraph here represents a space of whiteness, a culture of whiteness, one untroubled by other kinds of transatlantic passage. Again, the erasure of the black presence is troubling to modern viewers, not least because it signals the fact that a commitment to abolition and a belief in racial hierarchy coexisted easily in the nineteenth century. A belief in liberty and self-possession for all humans was not necessarily at odds with a notion of unequal human development.

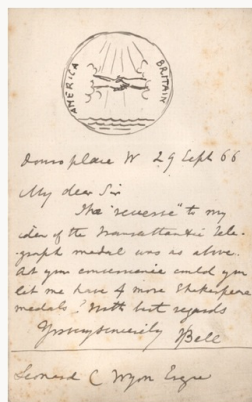


Fig. 13, John Bell, letter to Leonard C. Wyon, with sketch of verso design for *Transatlantic Telegraph Medal*, September 29, 1866. Currently on the market: “Historical Autographs,” Julian Browning Ltd, cat. no. 15808, <http://www.historicalautographs.co.uk/catalogue.asp?content=architecture%20and%20sculpture>.

[\[larger image\]](#)

While *The American Slave* is a representation of the black Atlantic, the androsphinxes are representations of the white (even if, in his talk at the Society of Arts, Bell saw the restoration of the white Atlantic as an end to the divisions created by slavery). The androsphinxes, the telegraph and its messages, draw the shores on either side of the Atlantic together. *The American Slave*, in contrast, represents the Atlantic as distance, as separation. The caption in the Royal Academy catalogue in 1853 made it clear that she is standing on the shore awaiting



transportation. Instead of the moment of almost instant communication, the woman contemplates the time of the journey, and the ever-receding cultural and moral horizon. Unlike the Archimedean line of the telegraph, with its back-and-forth of messages, *The American Slave* represents the middle passage of the triangular trade, a passage where movement is only one way.

The sum of all this, then, is good and bad America; the unity of America and Britain and their separation; the benefit of technological progress and the curse of the slave system; Anglo-Saxon liberty and the dark shadow of its betrayal. Different connections between time and morality are also apparent: deep racial history in the androsphinx, modern historical division in slavery. The androsphinx and *The American Slave* parallel white liberty and its dark shadow.

These ironies and ostensible contradictions suggest that much white abolitionism, like sculpture, had its limits. Nonetheless, such complexities do not negate the sincere ethical and political objectives of *The American Slave*. These distinctions return us to the fundamental pairing of allegorical and literal modes of sculpture, and their consequences for representing the slave. Bell's practice suggests that slavery marks the limit of the ideal. Allegory can only suppress the true horror of slavery. Realism, sentimentality, and the literal, in contrast, permit a fuller moral engagement and make a clearer demand for abolitionist action.

#### **Epilogue: The American Slave and the Armstrong Gun**

To end, I have a brief epilogue, which brings a further irony into the story. A full-size electrotype version of *The American Slave* was bought around 1870 by William Armstrong, 1st Baron Armstrong (1810–1900), who placed it in his house, Cragside, an Arts and Crafts masterpiece in Northumbria, where the statue still resides.<sup>[26]</sup> Armstrong, the first British engineer to be ennobled, was most famous for the gun that bore his name. In 1864, the capture by Union forces of an Armstrong gun in the Confederate Fort Fisher was widely reported. A naval report in the wake of the capture of the fort recorded that Armstrong 150-pounders had been mounted in many Confederate forts all “with Sir William Armstrong’s name marked in full” alongside a broad arrow, indicating the property of the British government.<sup>[27]</sup> Exactly how the gun at Fort Fisher reached the arsenal of the South is not known. Various explanations circulated in the press: that the gun was a gift from Armstrong to the Confederate cause, or a personal gift to Jefferson Davis; that the gun was a gift from English friends of the Confederacy; that it was a gift from merchants in Liverpool to the people of Wilmington; or presented to the rebels by blockade runners.<sup>[28]</sup>

Whatever the passage, Slaveownia clearly had supporters across the Atlantic. British abolitionists were only too aware of complicity between some of their countrymen and the slave South, and the fact that even though slavery had been abolished by Britain, the nation’s position was by no means unanimous. The writer of “America in Crystal” made a pointed critique of Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley’s *Travels in America*, a book published in 1851 recording her visit to the United States in 1849 and 1850.<sup>[29]</sup> In line with much similar literature, Lady Wortley whitewashed the slave society of the South: “Her Ladyship should have been the chosen commissioner of the States; she makes of slavery such a very prettiness. Her Ladyship is invited to the slave estate—a sort of black Arcadia—the property of the late President’s son. The dwellings were ‘very nice,’ many of them ‘ornamented with prints’; doubtless the Declaration of Independence, with portraits of the patriots among them.”<sup>[30]</sup>

*Punch*'s searing criticism of Wortley takes on a particular resonance in the context of an article about the Great Exhibition, not only in its description of an America where slavery is a happy institution, but also, more specifically, in bringing to mind the large eagle suspended over the American section and Mathew Brady's *Gallery of Illustrious Americans*, displayed behind Powers's statue, [which Lisa Volpe discusses in her article](#).

The British response to slavery became more complicated still during the Civil War. Of course, the sale of arms to either North or South was illegal in the United Kingdom, since it was officially neutral. But the use of legal loopholes, third parties, blockade runners, and routes to legitimate destinations such as Nassau, from whence things could be smuggled into the South, all made the import of weapons possible. Here the black and white Atlantics flow into each other, in the blockade runners' routes from Liverpool to Bermuda as in the slavers' routes from West Africa to Jamestown or other American slave ports.<sup>[31]</sup> The sale of Armstrong guns to both sides in the Civil War certainly depended upon secrecy and illegal strategies. Henrietta Heald has explained that Armstrong employed a man named Stuart Rendel, who oversaw the sale of armaments produced by Armstrong's Elswick Ordnance Company to foreign buyers. Through personal contacts, secret deals, and using go-betweens, Rendel managed to provide guns for both Union and Confederacy.<sup>[32]</sup> Armstrong was clearly aware of these illegal deals, and, while his later reminiscences demonstrated a real distaste for the slavery he witnessed when visiting Egypt in 1872, one can only conclude that, for him, the business of selling arms trumped any moral objection to American slavery.<sup>[33]</sup>

The Armstrong gun captured at Fort Fisher was widely discussed as a technological triumph, and, as the *New York Times* declared, was both ornamental and very beautiful.<sup>[34]</sup> It was taken as a trophy of war to the United States Military Academy at West Point, where it has been displayed ever since. Like *The Greek Slave*, the gun was not only put on display, but also circulated in prints, stereographs, and illustrations (fig. 14). On the one hand, this is to say no more than publishing, photographic technologies, and the press circulated images more widely than ever before. But, on the other, the Armstrong gun's presence and reproduction in the United States is a more emphatic reminder of the relationship between manufacture and slavery. Objects made to combat or preserve the "peculiar institution," and their reproduction, become a crucial part of debates about slavery, not just as symbols of one side or the other, but in the way that beauty and horror coexist. Whether the flawless marble of the ideal nude or the gleaming bronzed gun, mounted on its mahogany carriage and highly varnished, these things too cast the shadow of liberty. The maximum care lavished on such objects casts the shadow of the minimum care needed to keep a slave.

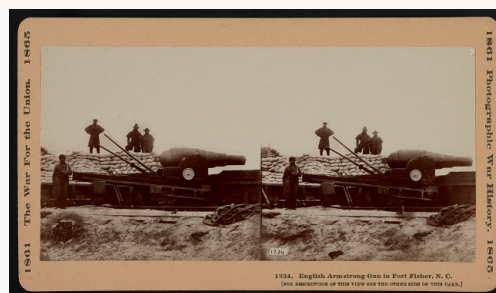


Fig. 14, Timothy O'Sullivan, *English Armstrong Gun in Fort Fisher, N.C.*, 1865. Albumen print on stereo card. Library of Congress, Washington, DC. [\[larger image\]](#)



This returns us to the companionship of objects, extending far beyond that which *Punch* proposed between the Greek and Virginian slaves. What emerges is a network of objects, within which Bell adumbrates Anglo-Saxon racial unity and Anglo-American moral division; manufacture and personhood; the demands of business and the imperatives of abolition; deep pacific history and modern Atlantic turpitude. The Armstrong gun is also a fitting companion for the Greek and American slaves; this 150-pounder, another shadow of English liberty in America.

Hands clasped and hands chained: the matrix of moral geography in Bell's work and its companions demonstrates the mutability of the transatlantic. It can be a term for a single culture, in which Anglo-Saxon transcends the ocean; it can be a term for profound separation, in which cultures are torn further and further apart. It also signals Anglo-Saxon division: North and South in the United States, pro- and antislavery in the United Kingdom, the multiple political connections which are ignored by the Armstrong gun's passage to both Union and Confederacy. *The American Slave* is, just like Powers's *Greek Slave*, a transatlantic object; but unlike Powers's slave, Bell's sculpture deliberately articulates these tensions between transatlantic unity and the terrible distances of the middle passage.

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## Notes

[1] It was the abolitionist William Wells Brown who declared Tenniel's image to be *The Greek Slave*'s "most fitting companion" at the Great Exhibition in 1851. Quoted in William Still, *The Underground Rail Road. A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, Etc.* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coates, 1872), 376. See also Lisa Volpe's essay in this issue, "Embodying the Octoroon: Abolitionist Performance at the London Crystal Palace, 1851." <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/summer16/volpe-on-abolitionist-performance-at-the-london-crystal-palace-1851>.

[2] "Local and Provincial," *Manchester Guardian*, August 27, 1853, 6.

[3] Ibid.

[4] John Bell, "On the Application of the Entasis to the Obelisk," *Papers Read at the Royal Institute of British Architects* (London: RIBA, 1858), 176–82; John Bell, "Some Remarks on the Application of Definite Proportions and the Conic Sections to Architecture, Illustrated Chiefly by the Obelisk, with some History of that Feature of Art," *Journal of the Society of Arts* 7, no. 340 (1859): 475–85.

[5] John Bell to Dawson Turner, July 21, 1837, GB/0397/JU/16/226, Royal Academy of Arts Archive, London; John Bell to Dawson Turner, September 15, 1845 (currently on the market: "Historical Autographs," Julian Browning Ltd, cat. no. 6704, accessed June 1, 2016, <http://>

[www.historicalautographs.co.uk/catalogue.asp?content=architecture%20and%20sculpture](http://www.historicalautographs.co.uk/catalogue.asp?content=architecture%20and%20sculpture)).

[6] "Metropolitan Free Drinking Fountains Association—*Conversazione* at St. James's Hall," *Building News and Architectural Review*, July 13, 1860, 549–50.

[7] Quoted in Richard Barnes, *John Bell: The Sculptor's Life and Works* (Kirstead: Frontier Publishing, 1999), 49.

[8] Michael Hatt, "Transparent Forms: Tinting, Whiteness and John Gibson's *Venus*," *Sculpture Journal* 23, vol. 2 (2014): 185–96.

[9] These companies included Felix Summerly's Art Manufactures (overseen by Henry Cole, the principal organizer of the Great Exhibition), for which Bell designed decorative objects such as clock cases, *tazze*, and cutlery, as well as licensing the sale of Parian reductions of sculptures; Elkington, which produced bronze and electrotype statuary including, of course, *The American Slave*; Minton, which made Parian and electrotype reductions of sculptures, as well as domestic objects including a chess set and traveling fonts; and Coalbrookdale, with which Bell produced numerous sculptures, available in bronze or iron. Coalbrookdale cast many of Bell's most important works, including *The Eagle Slayer*, *Andromeda*, and *The Cromwell Fountain*, as well drinking fountains, park gates, and large decorative items. The company also marketed versions of *The Octoroon*, available in bronze or iron. For an account of the relationship between sculpture and industry in Victorian Britain, and details of Bell's relationships with manufacturers, see Martina Droth, Jason Edwards, and Michael Hatt, eds., *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901*, exh. cat. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 18–30, 259–61, 268–70.

[10] Reda Mowafi, *Slavery, Slave Trade and Abolition Attempts in Egypt and the Sudan 1820–1882* (Lund: Esselte Studium, 1981).

[11] See, for example, Douglas C. Graham, *Glimpses of Abyssinia; or, Extracts from Letters Written while on a Mission from the Government of India to the King of Abyssinia in the Years 1841, 1842, and 1843* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867); Trevor Chichele Plowden, *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country, with an Account of a Mission to Ras Ali in 1848*, ed. Walter Chichele Plowden (London: Longmans, Green, 1868); John Camden Hotten, ed., *Abyssinia and its People: or, Life in the Land of Prester John* (London: John Camden Hotten, 1868).

[12] Sir Samuel White Baker, "Slavery and the Slave Trade," *Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science and Art*, September 1874, 296.

[13] For contemporary accounts, see, for examples, Hormuzd Rassam, *Narrative of the British Mission to Theodore, King of Abyssinia*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1869); and Charles Tilstone Beak, *The British Captives in Abyssinia* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867). A very interesting analysis of the expedition is in Nini Rodgers, "The Abyssinian Expedition of 1867–1868: Disraeli's Imperialism or James Murray's War?" *Historical Journal* 27, no. 1 (March 1984): 129–49.

[14] The letter is reprinted in Nancy J. Jacobs, *African History through Sources*, vol. 1, *Colonial Contexts and Everyday Experiences, c. 1850–1946* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 48.

[15] K. V. Ram, *The Barren Relationship: Britain and Ethiopia 1805 to 1868* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1985), 112.

[16] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 220–21.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Droth, Edwards, and Hatt, eds., *Sculpture Victorious*, 251–54.

[19] "America in Crystal," *Punch, or The London Charivari*, May 24, 1851, 209.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] For an account of such a visit, see George Augustus Sala, "Elkingtons and Electro: An Essay," in *Official Guide and Album of the Cunard Steamship Company*, rev. ed. (London: Sutton Sharp, 1876).

[22] Colin Cunningham, "Iconography and Victorian Values," in *The Albert Memorial*, ed. Chris Brooks (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 249.

[23] John Bell, "On the Composite Vital Forms and Creations of Art, in Relation to Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, and Decoration, and as Symbols," in *Papers Read at the Royal Institute of British Architects* (London: RIBA, 1859), 93–102.

[24] *Ibid.*, 101.

[25] John Bell, "On the Art-Treatment of Granitic Surfaces," *Journal of the Society of Arts* 8, no. 382 (March 16, 1860): 284.

[26] It is unclear where and from whom Armstrong bought the statue. Richard Barnes states that it was commissioned by Lord Hertford. Barnes, *John Bell*, 137. The 4th Marquess of Hertford, Richard Seymour-Conway, whose collection forms the core of the Wallace Collection, died in 1870, and so this work could have been sold by his heir, Sir Richard Wallace. While the Marquess had few pieces of contemporary sculpture in his collection, he did purchase Raffaele Monti's *Circassian Slave* in 1855 from Monti's post-bankruptcy studio sale.

[27] "Operations near Wilmington subsequent to the Capture of Fort Fisher, &c. Report of Rear-Admiral D. D. Porter," in *Report of the Secretary of the Navy with an Appendix Containing Reports from Officers* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, December 1865), 180.

[28] "Armstrong Gun," *Harper's Weekly*, February 11, 1865, 81; "Armstrong Gun at Fort Fisher," *New York Times*, January 29, 1865; Dean B. Mahin, *The Blessed Place of Freedom: Europeans in Civil War America* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2002), 216.

[29] Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, *Travels in the United States, etc., during 1849 and 1859* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1851).

[30] "America in Crystal," 209.

[31] For more on the movement of British arms during the Civil War, see Eric Graham, *Clyde Built: Blockade Runners, Cruisers and Armoured Rams of the American Civil War* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2006); Thomas Boaz, *Guns for Cotton: England Arms the Confederacy* (Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press, 1996).

[32] Henrietta Heald, *William Armstrong: Magician of the North* (Alnwick: Northumbria Press, 2010), 108–9. For more on Elswick's business, see Marshall J. Bastable, *Arms and the State: Sir William Armstrong and the Remaking of British Naval Power, 1854–1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

[33] Sir W. G. Armstrong, *A Visit to Egypt in 1872, Described in Four Lectures to the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: J. M. Carr, 1874), 30–33.

[34] "Armstrong Gun at Fort Fisher," *New York Times*, January 29, 1865.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1, John Tenniel, *The Virginian Slave, Intended as a Companion to Power's [sic] 'Greek Slave'*, *Punch* 20, June 7, 1851: 236. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, John Bell, *The American Slave [A Daughter of Eve]*, ca. 1862. Bronze patinated electrotype with silver and gold plating. The Armstrong Collection, National Trust, Cragside, Rothbury, Northumberland. Courtesy of the National Trust. Photograph by Nick Mead, 2014. [\[return to text\]](#)





Fig. 3, Richard Doyle, *The Shadow of English Liberty in America*, *Punch* 19, May 11, 1850: 190. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Pitcher with decoration after Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* and *Eve Tempted*, ca. 1853. Earthenware with Rockingham glaze. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Pitcher with decoration after Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* and *Eve Tempted*, ca. 1853. Earthenware with Rockingham glaze. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. [\[return to text\]](#)





Fig. 6, Detail of face, John Bell, *The American Slave [A Daughter of Eve]*, ca. 1862. Bronze patinated electrotyle with silver and gold plating. The Armstrong Collection, National Trust, Cragside, Rothbury, Northumberland. Courtesy of the National Trust. Photograph by Nick Mead, 2014. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, John Bell, *The Abyssinian Slave*, 1868. Parian ware. Sold by Special Auction Services, Newbury, Berkshire, May 5, 2015, lot 0443, <http://specialauctionservices.com/large/ma050515/lot0443.html>.

[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Detail of chains, John Bell, *The American Slave [A Daughter of Eve]*, ca. 1862. Bronze patinated electrotype with silver and gold plating. The Armstrong Collection, National Trust, Cragside, Rothbury, Northumberland. Courtesy of the National Trust. Photograph by Nick Mead, 2014. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Detail of chains, Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*, 1844. Marble. Raby Castle, Staindrop, County Durham. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Rt. Hon. Lord Barnard, Raby Castle. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, "Sample of American Manufacture", *Punch* 20, May 24, 1851: 209. [\[return to text\]](#)





Fig. 11, John Bell, *America*, 1864–69. Campanella marble. Albert Memorial, London. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, John Bell, *A Winged Leonine Androsphinx*, 1859. Plaster model. Location unknown. [\[return to text\]](#)

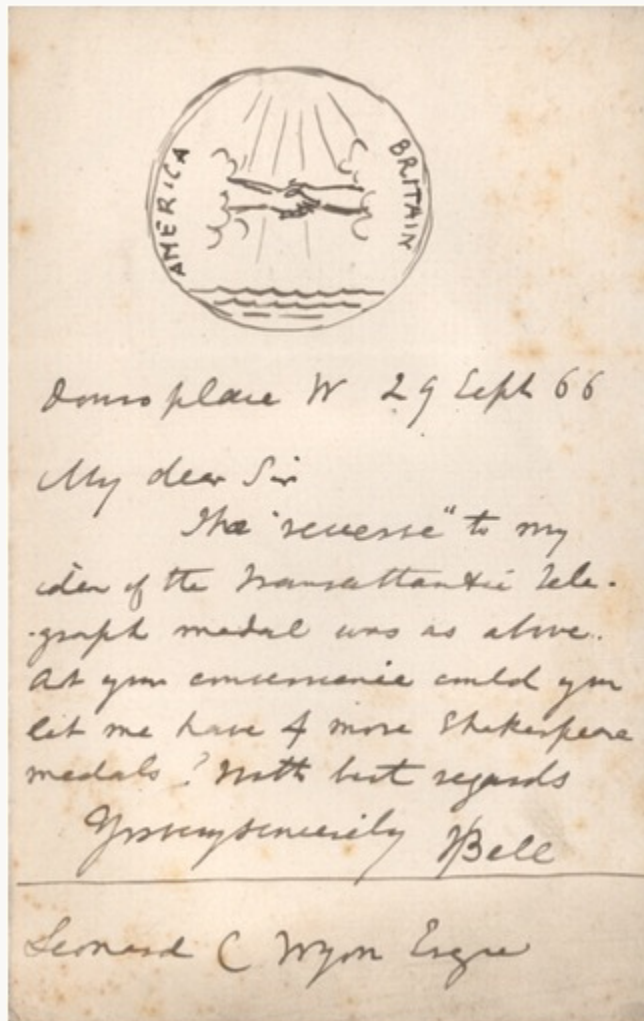


Fig. 13, John Bell, letter to Leonard C. Wyon, with sketch of verso design for *Transatlantic Telegraph Medal*, September 29, 1866. Currently on the market: "Historical Autographs," Julian Browning Ltd, cat. no. 15808, <http://www.historicalautographs.co.uk/catalogue.asp?content=architecture%20and%20sculpture>.  
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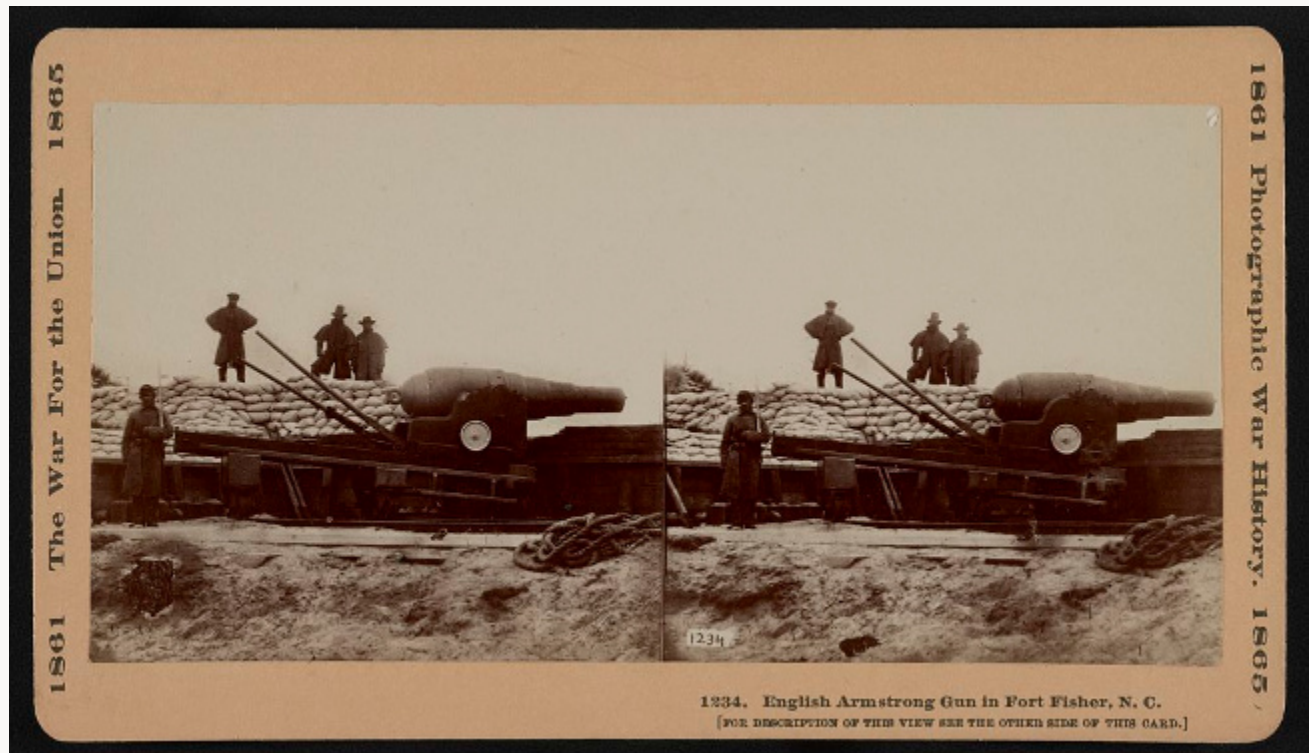


Fig. 14, Timothy O'Sullivan, *English Armstrong Gun in Fort Fisher, N.C.*, 1865. Albumen print on stereo card.  
Library of Congress, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)