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THE WHITE KNIGHT:
EDWIN AUSTIN ABBEY'S QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL
IN THE BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

by
Aileen Elizabeth Bell

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
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[Signature] 7 August 2002

Sarah J. Moore
Associate Professor of Art History
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DEDICATION

To my husband C.J.,

for his patience, faith, and love.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.............................................................................................................................................. 6

CHAPTER I, Introduction......................................................................................................................... 7

CHAPTER II, Visions of Glory: *The Quest for the Holy Grail* and the American Renaissance ........................................................................................................................................... 18

CHAPTER III, Murals and the Quest for an American Art.......................................................................... 33

CHAPTER IV, Palace and Pulpit: Murals, Missionaries, and the Boston Public Library.......................... 43

CHAPTER V, The White Knight and the Spiritual Warrior: Race, Masculinity, and *The Quest for the Holy Grail* ........................................................................................................................................... 55

CHAPTER VI, Conclusion.......................................................................................................................... 70

NOTES....................................................................................................................................................... 73

REFERENCES............................................................................................................................................ 80
ABSTRACT

The Boston Public Library was founded on the principle that it would serve the needs of Boston's entire populace, without respect to class, race, or gender. However, despite this democratic ideology, the nineteenth-century library, in its practices and artistic expressions, articulated an elite conception of the perfect American. Edwin Austin Abbey's *Quest for the Holy Grail* (1890-1902), painted for the library building of McKim, Mead, and White (begun 1883), embodies the cosmopolitan, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, and masculine values of Boston's elite through its American Renaissance style, its subject, and its iconography. In particular, the figure of Galahad, the hero of Abbey's mural, conforms to models of spirituality, race, and manhood that legitimated the power and social position of the financial, political, and cultural elite that administered and constructed the library.
CHAPTER I

Introduction

...[T]he choice of *The Quest of the Holy Grail* for pictorial representation, by an American painter, in the adornment of a great public library, is an event of singular importance. It requests the consideration of the thoughtful, and has a large meaning to all who care for the development of art in our age and country.


In November of 1888, the cornerstone of the building of the Boston Public Library was laid with great fanfare. The poet Oliver Wendell Holmes solemnized the occasion by declaring the new library to be a "People's Palace," a place where people of all classes could come and pay tribute to the great monarchs of knowledge.[2] The trustees of the library made every effort to make the building of the Boston Public Library worthy of Holmes' imagination. For this end they enlisted the aid of noted architects, sculptors, and artists to create a building that would, in its art, evoke the grandeur of European monuments such as the Bibliothèque St.-Geneviève in Paris (c. 1850). One of these artists was the American Edwin Austin Abbey (1852-1911), commissioned in 1890 to paint a mural cycle for the Delivery Room. At the time, Abbey was an illustrator for Harper's magazines, especially noted for his illustrations of Shakespeare. However, it was not Shakespeare that Abbey ultimately used for his first mural commission. Instead, Abbey chose to illustrate the narrative of Galahad's *Quest for the Holy Grail*. [3]

After a decade of work, Abbey's murals were installed in 1902; the decorative cycle is eight feet in height and 194 feet long, containing about 150 life-size figures. The mural tells the story of Galahad's Quest, from his unusual infancy to his eventual
achievement of the Grail. The mural was a notable achievement for any artist, certainly for one who had mostly worked in pen and ink; in his medieval narrative, Abbey provided enough pomp and ceremony to befit the palatial setting imagined by the trustees of the library. Furthermore, Abbey's choice of a European narrative was consistent with the vision of the architects of the Boston Public Library, McKim, Mead and White. These architects were early practitioners of the American Renaissance, a movement which looked to the artistic and stylistic precedents of the Italian Renaissance and its various revival forms as models for what they hoped would become a national American art.[4] The Boston Public Library became one of the first significant examples of this movement, demonstrating American Renaissance ideals through the complementary efforts of the architects and artists that worked on the building. Abbey's European narrative and his style were fitting for this cosmopolitan setting.

Upon the completion of the murals, critical reactions were mixed. Some extolled his interpretation of the American Renaissance through a European subject. Others, however, did not understand how Abbey's subject related to the history and heritage of either Boston or the Boston Public Library. The art critic E. R. Pennell, for example argued that "[o]ne may be inclined to question this choice [of subject] as utterly irrelevant. It is not easy to understand the relation of Holy Grail to Boston Public Library."[5] Others such as Charles Shean [6] would also criticize Abbey's choice of a medieval subject, arguing that the European narrative was not befitting an American library, since it described neither American history nor American literature.
It is ironic that while Abbey's contemporaries were so highly concerned with the relationship of Abbey's subject to its American context, subsequent art historians have ignored any connections between Abbey's mural and its immediate social and historical setting. Those few art historians who have even made mention of Abbey's murals have chosen biographical, stylistic, and textual approaches, rather than social-historical methods, to describe Abbey's work. The first major history of Abbey's work, and the only biography of Abbey to date, is the 1921 book by Edward Verrall Lucas, *Edwin Austin Abbey, R.A.: The Record of His Life and Work.* [7] Completed only ten years after Abbey's death, this massive two-volume work is an invaluable resource for art historians, since Lucas included many firsthand accounts from family and friends about Abbey's life and work. However, as Abbey's biographer, Lucas is primarily interested in the biographical details of Abbey's life, and less concerned with how Abbey's work related to its social or artistic contexts.

The second major art historical work on Abbey is a catalogue for an exhibition of the artist's work that was held at the Yale University Art Gallery in 1973. [8] The authors of the catalogue, Kathleen Foster and Michael Quick, lean heavily on Lucas for their biographical information. Their most important contribution is their analysis of the stylistic development of Abbey's oeuvre. They observe how his technique and compositional devices develop over time, as well as noting the elements that make Abbey's illustrations so effective dramatically and psychologically. However they, like Lucas, do not demonstrate how Abbey's work was shaped by its particular social and historical moment.
Since the Yale catalogue, there has only been one art historical work to deal exclusively with Abbey's *Quest for the Holy Grail*, Erica Hirshler's 1994 article, "A Quest for the Holy Grail: Edwin Austin Abbey's Murals for the Boston Public Library." [9] Hirshler's goal is to identify the different versions of the Grail legend that Abbey used to construct his narrative. Her approach is important because Abbey was primarily an illustrator, accustomed to visually narrating the events of a text. Yet Hirshler has little to say about Abbey's initial choice of his subject, arguing that Abbey's expatriate experience and his participation in the American Renaissance were the primary reasons for his choice of narrative. She notes that the founders of the Boston Public Library were motivated by the particular ideals of Boston's elite, and that Abbey probably would have shared these ideals. Yet, she contends that since Abbey never explicitly expressed political motivations and ideals, it is impossible to ascribe a particular social agenda to Abbey's work. [10]

However, to argue that Abbey's mural cycle does not articulate social ideals is to deny the essential public nature of mural art and the political, historical, and social interactions that define both the public space and the viewing public. According to art historian Sally Promey in her 1999 book, *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent's Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library*, the term "public" is constructed by power relations among different social groups. [11] In other words, the physical, social, and ideological parameters of a public space are determined by the social groups responsible for the creation and maintenance of that space. Similarly, these same social groups control who ultimately has access to that space. As part of this public
setting, murals must be considered within a larger discourse about who has control over the public space and who is allowed and encouraged to use that space.

Ideally, every member of a community should be allowed access to a public setting. As Promey notes, the designation of a space as public denotes that it is accessible to a wide community and is a place for that community to interact socially.[12] The concept of accessibility was essential to the ideal of a public library, an ideal expressed by Charles C. Jewett, Librarian to the Smithsonian Institution, in the 1851 document, *Notices of Public Libraries in the United States of America*. Jewett defines libraries as public when they "are accessible -- either without restriction, or upon conditions with which all can easily comply -- to every person who wishes to use them for their appropriate purposes."[13]

As a public library, with a collection accessible to the general population, the Boston Public Library was one of the first of its kind in America. An act of the Massachusetts Legislature in 1848 first authorized the library. The library was founded in 1852 and opened its doors in the spring of 1854.[14] At the time, there were only five public library institutions in the United States with collections of at least 50,000 volumes. Of these five, two were in Boston, at Harvard University and the Boston Athaneum.[15] However, neither of these institutions was envisioned as large circulating libraries that should be open to the general population. In contrast, the Boston Public Library was established on the principle, inscribed on its facade, that it would be "FREE TO ALL," inviting people of all classes to use the library and its collections.
This use of the word "free" is indicative of a certain political rhetoric that was applied to the early public library movement. In particular, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the idea of accessibility became equated with the ideal of democracy; it was an ideological stance that assumed that the library's patrons were social equals. However, in reality, the practice of this ideal was limited, since social status largely determined who had control over the practices of the library. The concept of democracy applied to the public library only in the sense that the general population could participate in the use of the library.

This limited definition of the democracy of the public library is most vividly illustrated by the way in which the financial, political, and cultural elite, or more broadly, the social elite, used the Boston Public Library to establish their own position in society. The members of these elite groups belonged to the highest economic demographic, which was generally non-working class and non-immigrant, and it was these powerful people who were responsible for financing and founding the library. In particular, mural paintings became tools with which the social elite imposed their ideals upon their non-elite audiences. This process included an attempt to partly assimilate members of the working and immigrant classes in order to neutralize any threat posed by their different religious, social, and political views. At the same time, the social elite was concerned with establishing their own superior social status and legitimizing their power.

Mural painting was a tool well-suited for this social negotiation because in the 1890's, mural subjects were almost universally didactic in nature and were intended to communicate social, political or moral ideals, usually defined by the cultural elite that
commissioned and executed the murals. In the words of artist and self-styled art historian Edwin Blashfield, "[p]ublic and municipal art is a public and municipal educator. The decoration of temples and cathedrals and town halls has naturally taught patriotism, morals, [and] aesthetics...."[16] It is significant that Blashfield places "town halls" in the same category as "temples and cathedrals." Blashfield and his contemporaries viewed murals as sites where their vision of civic morality could be clearly defined and promulgated. In the Boston Public Library, the cultural elite were concerned with expressing an ideal of an American citizenry composed of Protestant communities governed by Anglo-Saxon men. In doing so, this elite group hoped to strengthen their own social position. The purpose of this study is to show how Abbey's *Quest for the Holy Grail* supported the particular social ideology of the Boston Public Library with regard to spirituality, race, and masculinity. In doing so, I will argue that in contrast to the criticism of Abbey's contemporaries, Abbey's medieval narrative was eminently suitable for its specific historical and social context.

In chapter two, I will set the stage for this analysis by describing the specific artistic and social setting for which Abbey's mural was created -- the library itself. The Boston Public Library was one of the first large public libraries in the United States. As a result, it is not surprising that the founders of the Boston Public Library looked to European precedents, both in the organization of the library and in its architecture and art. In particular, this European model was expressed by the style of the American Renaissance embraced by both the architects and artists of the library. Some of these commissioned artists included Daniel Chester French, Puvis de Chavannes, and John
Singer Sargent; in their own ways, all adopted the American Renaissance style. Edwin Austin Abbey also embraced the American Renaissance, demonstrated by the circumstances of his commission and the finished mural. This chapter will describe Abbey's narrative and his compositional and stylistic approaches in the mural, placing the *Quest for the Holy Grail* within its specific artistic context. By doing so, it becomes clear that Abbey's mural was stylistically consistent with both the building itself and the American Renaissance that defined the Boston Public Library.

The third chapter will contextualize Abbey's mural within its larger artistic setting, in terms of its subject and its critical reception. Many praised Abbey's choice of subject, and in particular how it represented the ideals of the American Renaissance. Abbey's supporters believed that murals were essential to the development of a national American art, and that European artistic precedents should shape American cultural expression. Abbey's critics also believed that murals should be the focus of an American national art, but thought that murals should break from European subjects and stylistic forms, and express an American voice by representing scenes of American history. Both groups were ultimately engaged in a debate about American identity. Assuming that American character is shaped by the American past, one group envisioned the ideal American as a citizen of the world, whose values were based on European precedents. The other group believed that American character had been made unique by American histories and narratives. Murals became a locus for this debate, and how muralists chose to represent the past says much about the aspirations of the local communities that commissioned the murals.
Chapter four will begin to examine the aspirations of those responsible for the creation of the Boston Public Library, and in particular, how Protestant ideals were specifically manifest in both the Boston Public Library and in Edwin Austin Abbey's *Quest for the Holy Grail*. These Protestant ideals were translated into a sense of religious mission that limited the proclaimed democratic purposes of the public library. While the Boston Public Library hoped to reach an audience of many races and religions, the overwhelmingly white, wealthy, and male founders of the Boston Public Library also hoped to disseminate a particular type of knowledge that would elevate the "rude" classes to a higher level of cultural and spiritual existence. The founders wanted to encourage the heterogeneous population of Boston to embrace a Protestant cultural identity that supported the class distinctions within Boston at the end of the nineteenth century.

In addition to encouraging the heterogeneous population of Boston to conform to certain religious standards, the Boston Public Library also established ideals of race and masculinity that distinguished Boston's elite in an attempt to establish their social status and their right to power. Chapter five will examine these hegemonic ideals as they are expressed through Galahad. First, I will demonstrate the importance of Galahad's Anglo-Saxon racial identity, and argue that Galahad's race helped elite groups establish a socially superior position in the face of an increasingly pluralistic society.

It was also important that Galahad represent an ideal masculinity, a reaction, in part, to the growing numbers of women in the library field and the growing presence of women in political, economic, and social realms. In some respects, Galahad does not appear to be a suitable symbol of masculinity, since he does not exhibit obvious physical
traits of masculinity, such as bulging muscles or facial hair. This brawny masculinity is exemplified in works such as Abbey's 1907-1911 Harrisburg murals, in particular, in the shirtless and decidedly muscular men in the image of Vulcan's forge. Yet Galahad differs from the heroes of industry in Abbey's forge, since his success is defined by spiritual, rather than material accomplishment. As a spiritual warrior, nineteenth-century constructions of masculinity required Galahad to be both youthful and androgynous. Galahad's defining spirituality made him the perfect hero for the Boston Public Library, whose founders were so intent on preaching Protestant values.

In this social-historical approach to Abbey's murals, I am indebted to the work of several scholars who have guided my understandings of the history of the Boston Public Library. In particular, Sally Promey's book on the *Triumph of Religion* has been invaluable. One of Promey's important contributions is to recognize how the tension between the democratic ideals of the Boston Public Library and the specific ideals of Boston's elite founders influenced the art and architecture of the Boston Public Library. Her analysis of John Singer Sargent's murals provided a theoretical model with which to understand Abbey's *Quest for the Holy Grail*. Also of great value has been the work of Sidney Ditzion in 1947 and Dee Garrison in 1979 on the social history of the early public library movement.[17] They trace the history of the public library system and note the importance of Protestant ideals to early librarians, helping me to recognize the role of spirituality in the early library system.

This analysis has also been influenced by scholars working in the field of gender studies. In particular, Abigail Van Slyck's 1995 book, *Free To All*, helped to define the
inherent masculinity in the early library system. Also of great value has been the third chapter from Kymberly Pinder's 1996 Dissertation, "Representations of Medieval Chivalry in American Art, 1870-1930." Pinder is especially interested in the role of chivalry in Abbey's work and how this chivalry is constructed in terms of gender roles. Pinder takes particular note of Galahad's androgyny and how it connects to androgynous representations of the feminine in the late-nineteenth century. Her observations highlighted the possible contradictions between Galahad's form and his masculinity, leading me to explore the connections between spirituality and masculinity in late nineteenth-century America.

My own research builds on the work of these scholars in order to demonstrate how the social and moral ideals of the founders of the Boston Public Library ultimately shaped Abbey's interpretation of the *Quest for the Holy Grail*. The library was intended to serve as a place of assimilation where Bostonian immigrants of the lower classes could absorb the ideals and standards of the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, elite Bostonian classes. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to argue that Abbey's *Quest for the Holy Grail* not only expressed the ideals of the founders of the Boston Public Library, but it supported a vision of society in which Anglo-Saxon Protestant men asserted their power. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the social and historical context that shaped Abbey's choice of narrative, for even if the *Quest for the Holy Grail* does not represent an uniquely American story, Abbey's mural represented the ideals and aspirations of a specific American social elite.
CHAPTER II

Visions of Glory:

The Quest for the Holy Grail and the American Renaissance

On one level, the success of Edwin Austin Abbey's *Quest for the Holy Grail* can be measured by his response to the stylistic concerns of the founders who commissioned the mural and the architects who designed the Boston Public Library. In particular, the elite founders of the library shared a desire to recreate the glory of the European artistic and cultural past in America. To realize this dream, the founders embraced the cosmopolitan vision of the architects McKim, Mead, and White. Leaders of the American Renaissance movement, these architects wanted to establish an American artistic tradition by adopting European prototypes, and in particular, by using a visual vocabulary shaped by the nineteenth-century perception of the Renaissance. In doing so, the architects and artists of the American Renaissance aligned their work with European culture and hoped to legitimate their art by giving it a patina of history.

Central to the practice of this movement was the collaboration of the different arts. American Renaissance architects, and McKim, Mead and White in particular, wanted both the architecture and the interior decoration of a building to demonstrate an awareness of European models. Thus it is not surprising that McKim, Mead and White supported the commission of artists with cosmopolitan training and tastes. These artists included Daniel Chester French, Puvis de Chavannes, and John Singer Sargent, all of whom had lived in Europe and received European training, just as had McKim, Mead and White. Drawing
from their experiences, all of these artists responded to their commissions by using European compositional and stylistic models, in addition to choosing European subjects. Edwin Austin Abbey was no exception. An expatriate living in England when he executed the murals, Abbey employed a strategy similar to that of his cosmopolitan colleagues. His finished mural ultimately conformed to the stylistic demands of its American Renaissance setting.

In order to better understand the reasons why the American Renaissance was so suited for the Boston Public Library, it is important to understand that from its beginnings as an institution, the library demonstrated the cosmopolitan connections and tastes of Boston's financial, political, and cultural elite. These cosmopolitan connections are certainly manifest by the fact that the original impetus for the Boston Public Library came not from Boston, but from France and England.[20] The library project was first proposed by a Parisian citizen residing in Boston, Alexandre Vattemare, at a public meeting in May of 1841. His suggestion was well-received, and M. Vattemare went so far as to arrange an exchange between Boston and the city of Paris -- fifty French books in exchange for fifty American ones. These fifty French volumes were the beginning of the Boston Public Library's collection.[21] After this first donation, further donations were slow in coming, until in 1852, a London banker born in Boston, Joshua Bates, proposed that if the city would provide a suitable building for the library, he would donate 50,000 dollars to buy books for the collection.[22]

The initial European support for the library testifies to the social connections that existed between Europe and Boston's financial, political, and cultural elite. In particular, it
demonstrates how Boston's elite looked to Europe for cultural inspiration. It is important to remember that in 1850, the United States had yet to celebrate its 75th birthday. It is not surprising that the American elite would turn to long established European traditions, not only because of their history, but because Boston's elite were themselves of European descent. The American Renaissance, with its emphasis on European models, expressed this tendency to look to Europe, and ultimately the architecture and art of the Boston Public Library would express these cosmopolitan tastes.

In the beginning, the library did not have a building of its own, but rather was housed in an upper room in the Old City Hall. As the library grew, it needed a new home and was eventually moved to the Bates Building on Boylston Street, completed in 1854, and named in honor of the London banker whose early benefaction played a critical role in the library's foundation. However, by the 1870s, even the new Bates building was inadequate, and the Boston Library trustees began drawing up plans for a new library.

Originally the commission for the library building was given to the city architect, Arthur H. Vinal, who had been responsible for the Boylston Street site. However, his appointment drew objections from many in the artistic community, including Boston's Art Club, which had found Vinal's work on the Boylston Street building to be unresponsive to the functional uses of the library. Newspaper articles also objected that the library building was being left to the City Architect, as if it were a fire station.[23] It eventually became apparent that Boston's cultural elite wanted the building to demonstrate their high cultural and artistic aspirations.
In 1883, the New York-based firm of McKim, Mead and White was approached to design the new library building which would be located in Boston's Copley Square. Leading practitioners of the American Renaissance movement, these architects were well-prepared to satisfy the cosmopolitan artistic taste of Boston's cultural elite. In 1895 the building was finally completed for a cost of over 2.5 million dollars. The finished building, in both its architecture and art, captured the most important ideals of the American Renaissance, from its emphasis on Italian Renaissance forms and European subjects, to the stylistic unity of the whole.

Considering Holmes' designation of the building as a palace, it is not surprising that in many ways, the Boston Public Library resembled an Italian palazzo. The horizontal building has a two-story facade, which is articulated at regular intervals by pilastered arches on the second story. The lower story is centered in the middle by three arched portals, and then symmetrically balanced on each side by five windows. This horizontal emphasis combined with the arches does indeed give the building a Renaissance appearance. The bottom floor of the facade is less ornate. While the top floor includes sculptural reliefs, rondels, and a decorated cornice, by sculptors such as Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Domingo Mora, the bottom floor has a plain facing of stone with no sculptural work. The separation of these different levels is very much in the spirit of the Florentine Palazzo Medici-Riccardi, a model that was emulated countless times throughout Europe.

The interior of the building, which includes vaulted ceilings and spacious courtyards, also gives the impression of an Italian Palazzo. Furthermore, many of the
ceiling paintings and mosaics throughout the buildings are done in the Italianate Venetian and Pompeian styles. The interior is also full of rich marbles and Corinthian columns such as are found in the Delivery Room.

The overall effect of the architecture of the Boston Public Library is one of cultured grandeur. This cosmopolitan vision was supported by the artists hired to collaborate with McKim, Mead and White to create sculpture, paintings, and murals for the library. This collaborative effort to achieve a particular aesthetic was typical of American Renaissance ensembles. Indeed, this collaborative approach had already been demonstrated at Boston's Copley Square in the neo-Romanesque Trinity Church built by Henry Hobson Richardson (1872-1877), which has murals painted by John La Farge and sculpture by Augustus St.-Gaudens, all artists that would be influential in the American Renaissance movement.[24] The goal of this effort was to create a building characterized by the stylistic unity of the architectural and decorative elements. Similarly, in the Boston Public Library, all of the artists strived for similar visual effects, and in particular, they used traditional compositional and modeling techniques so that their work emulated European prototypes. And yet while all of these artists worked in this traditional vein, they interpreted their subjects in different ways.

Some of the artists given decorative commissions for the library interpreted the American Renaissance in humanistic terms -- as a rebirth of classical forms and subjects in a secular context. Just as it had during the Italian Renaissance, the classical past represented the epitome of culture for the American Renaissance. By appropriating and reinterpreting classical ideas, American Renaissance artists hoped to equate American
culture with that of Greece and Rome. Such was the approach of the sculptor Daniel Chester French, who sculpted a series of female allegorical figures clad in togas and laurel wreaths for the bronze doors of the vestibule (c1895). These female figures include music, poetry, wisdom, truth, and romance. He also sculpted one male figure, who represents knowledge.[25] The French painter Puvis de Chavannes also chose to represent classical allegory in his mural *The Muses of Inspiration Welcoming the Spirit of Light* (1895), which occupies the wall spaces of the main staircase. It depicts the nine female muses of Greek mythology ascending the hill of Parnassus to exalt the masculine youth that represents the spirit of Enlightenment. Puvis de Chavannes' mural, with its sculptural bodies and Ancient Greek subject, clearly evokes classical art. Ultimately, both Daniel Chester French and Puvis de Chavannes were asserting that America, like Europe, had the right to lay claim to a Classical heritage and the cultural legitimacy it provided.

While Daniel Chester French and Puvis de Chavannes chose to represent the more secular aspects of knowledge and culture, John Singer Sargent's *The Triumph of Religion* (1890-1919), represents the progress of religious culture. This religious strain of the American Renaissance echoes the religiosity of the Italian Renaissance, and attests to the continuing importance of Christianity in American culture. American Renaissance artists borrowed not only the classical attributes of the Italian Renaissance, but its religious expressions as well. Sargent's series of murals, which occupies the third-floor staircase hall of the library, represent the history of the religions of the Western World, and the ultimate triumph of Christianity over paganism and Judaism. Stylistically, his mural has much in common with other decorative cycles of the American Renaissance, in particular,
his use of a rich palette and his sculptural figures. Sargent also is typical of artists of the
American Renaissance in his use of the Italian Renaissance to establish a foundation for a
new artistic tradition. In particular, Sally Promey observes that Sargent extensively
borrowed from images in the Vatican, in an attempt to create a new shrine of culture, one
not in a church, but in a temple of knowledge.[26]

Like Sargent, Abbey chose to interpret the American Renaissance style through a
spiritual lens, by choosing to depict a narrative that, while secular in origin, had an obvious
Christian message. The Quest for the Holy Grail, a spiritual epic with English origins and
a following in many European countries, was well-suited as a vehicle for expressing the
aspirations of the American Renaissance. It was a story of a legendary past in which men
aspired to both physical and spiritual greatness. In the nineteenth century it had become
one of the central epics of European culture, and by adapting it for an American setting,
Abbey was claiming that legendary past for America. Abbey also embraced the American
Renaissance by adopting a cosmopolitan style that consciously imitated Italian painters, as
well as his contemporaries in England. Therefore, both in subject and in form, Abbey's
mural fulfilled the stylistic requirements of the Boston Public Library and the American
Renaissance.

Indeed, it was largely because of Abbey's connections to the American Renaissance
that he was commissioned in 1890 to create a mural for the Delivery Room of the library,
despite the fact that up to that point Abbey had little experience with painting or with the
mural medium.[27] One point in Abbey's favor was that he had demonstrated a penchant
for Renaissance subjects through his previous work. When he was commissioned, Abbey
was well-known for his illustrations of literary and historical themes in *Harper's Weekly* and *Harper's Monthly*. In particular, Abbey was making a name for himself as an illustrator of the Renaissance playwright William Shakespeare.

Another point in Abbey's favor was his experience with the Pre-Raphaelites, a movement that in its historicism, shared ideals with the American Renaissance. In 1848, a group of artists in England made a conscious decision to turn away from academic models, and instead look to the masters of the Quattrocento for artistic inspiration, and in particular, to Raphael. The purpose of this movement was a moral one. Artists hoped that by turning to Renaissance prototypes, they would recover a more pure art that would in turn improve the moral behavior of society. American artists and architects came in contact with the Pre-Raphaelite movement and the subsequent Aesthetic Movement when studying abroad in England, and these artists were thus encouraged to look at the Renaissance for artistic inspiration. Some of these artists, including James McNeill Whistler, John Singer Sargent, and Edwin Austin Abbey, went so far as to permanently settle in England. These artists and others helped to encourage the revival of Renaissance forms in American Art.

Yet perhaps the most important point in Abbey's favor regarding his commission was his friendship with the architects McKim, Mead and White. Abbey was one of the founders of the Tile Club, an informal group of artists, which included the architects and other artists involved in the library, including Augustus Saint-Gaudens.[28] As a member of the social network that helped to create the library, Abbey's commission was a natural one.
Abbey's commission specified that he provide the Delivery Room of the library with a frieze 180 ft. long and 8 ft. high, for 15,000 dollars. This sum was translated into roughly 3,000 English pounds, since Abbey was living in London at the time of the commission.[29] No further demands concerning subject or style were given, although the trustees suggested that Abbey paint an image from Shakespeare or from some of the other great writers of Europe. Indeed, a Shakespearean subject would have been highly appropriate considering Abbey's experience and the fact that a library is a repository for literature. However, Abbey evidently had some latitude in his choice of subject, for he chose not a Shakespearean tale, but a medieval one -- the story of the knight Galahad and his *Quest for the Holy Grail.[30]*

First exhibited in a London gallery in 1895 [31] and finally installed in 1902, Abbey's finished mural contains fifteen separate canvases in oil that together are eight feet in height and 194 feet long. The mural contains about 150 life-size figures that tell the story of Galahad's quest for the Holy Grail, from his birth to the end of his quest. In the mural, Abbey chose to highlight key moments of the grail narrative from a variety of literary sources. The primary literary sources for the cycle have been identified by the art historian Erica Hirshler as Malory's *Morte d'Arthur,* Tennyson's Arthurian Poems, and Alfred Nutt's 1888 book, *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail.* Nutt, who was a friend of Abbey's, had compiled the different variations of the Grail Legend and traced their chronological development.[32] According to Abbey's biographer, Edward Lucas, in the course of his research for the mural, Abbey read all these sources and more.[33]
The result was a narrative cycle of his own shaping; Abbey ultimately chose only to depict those scenes that he felt were central to the explication of the narrative and the development of Galahad's character. Beyond the fact that all of the scenes tell essentially the same story, what Abbey's choice of narrative reveals is a desire to capture not only Galahad's physical journey, but his spiritual quest. Throughout the mural, the spiritual nature of this quest is emphasized, both by the figure of Galahad himself and by the nature of his trials and temptations. Ultimately, the mural is a narrative of both Galahad's external quest for the Grail and internal quest for spiritual transformation.[34]

The mural begins with a scene of Galahad's infancy, as he is held aloft by a young nun to an angel. Born in an abbey, the young Galahad has already been marked for the spiritual life, emphasized by Abbey's description of the infant's spiritual vision. The mural then moves to the adult Galahad and the beginning of the Quest. The next three scenes depict "The Vigil of Galahad, or the Oath of Knighthood," the "Round Table, or Galahad and the Siege Perilous," and "The Departure, or the Benediction upon the Quest." These scenes take place in Arthur's castle, and are filled with the figures attending the court of Arthur, from ladies and their knights, to priests, and divine messengers. At the center of activity, is the blond, fair, and beardless Galahad, dressed in the red robe that he wears throughout the mural. They are rather crowded scenes, and later in the cycle, Abbey simplifies his scenes by reducing the number of figures, so the focus remains on the figure of Galahad. These scenes establish Galahad's legitimacy as a knight, and thus seal his right to undertake this quest. They also show the spiritual sanction that Galahad received at the outset of his quest, both from the church and a ghostly white figure of Joseph of
Arimithea, the man who, according to legend, received the Grail at the Crucifixion and then brought it to Great Britain.

Abbey then shifts to a new chapter in the narrative -- the quest itself, and in particular, the various temptations which challenge the young knight's resolve to carry out his quest. He finds the Castle of the Grail in the following scene, but for some mysterious reason, then loses it. He then faces one of his greatest temptations, the Loathely Damsel and her companions, who mock Galahad's quest. They come upon Galahad mourning his loss of the Castle in the forest. Through his interaction with the Loathely Damsel, Galahad comes to the realization that the reason he failed in the castle was that he merely desired knowledge of the Grail. He had failed to seek understanding and wisdom through his quest, which in the end was a goal more important than the Grail itself. This realization is the beginning of Galahad's transformation from a seeker of the Grail to a seeker of Enlightenment.

After the Loathely Damsel, Galahad then must slay the Seven Deadly Sins in order to get the key that will lead him onward. Armed in mail for the first time in the narrative, Galahad succeeds against the well-armed Sins. After facing and triumphing in the face of both literal and spiritual sin, Galahad emerges triumphant and is then allowed access to the Castle of the Maidens, where he sets free the Virtues that have been imprisoned there. In this scene, Galahad bows low to a room full of ladies, dressed mostly in white, who gesture their thanks to the knight. Thus goes the first phase of Galahad's spiritual transformation, where he is able to triumph by metaphorically conquering the
worldly lusts and sins that assail all men, whether or not they have dedicated themselves to a spiritual journey.

It is at this point of triumph that Galahad faces his sorest test, "The Denial of his Bride, Blanchefleur." In the Castle of the Maidens, Galahad had met with an old teacher, who, on his deathbed, begs Galahad to marry his daughter. Galahad concedes and marries Blanchefleur, only to deny consummating the marriage, after realizing on his wedding morning that only a virgin knight could achieve the Grail. This last test is not one that tests Galahad's character as much as his spiritual and physical resolve.

It is this final test which ultimately leads him to the end of his journey. After the Denial of Blanchefleur, the next scene described by Abbey is Galahad's return to the Castle of the Grail, where his quest for understanding leads him to ask the right questions to release the King who is imprisoned there. Galahad is thus given a vision of where the Grail finally resides. The last three scenes of the mural depict the ultimate end of this quest -- Galahad's Voyage to the Holy City of Sarras, a visual description of the City of Sarras, and the scene in which Galahad finally achieves the Grail. Although the mural does not depict Galahad's death, according to the narrative, this final achievement of the Grail was only after Galahad's passing. And thus, just as Galahad first had a heavenly vision of the Grail, now the viewer is having a heavenly vision of Galahad, surrounded by angels entwined in Gold Vines, surrounding a figure in white who holds up the Grail.

The spiritual qualities of the narrative depicted by Abbey are enhanced by his figural style, which has its roots in the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic. Throughout the mural, the figures are characterized by their long bodies, their graceful poses, and the soft edges
of the faces. There are no hard lines in Abbey's mural, and the soft quality of the edges is emphasized by a golden light that suffuses the painting. In this approach to his figures, Abbey has much in common with Pre-Raphaelites such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti with whom Abbey was familiar. For example, if one compares "The Achievement of the Grail" from Abbey's mural with Rossetti's *How Sir Galahad, Sir Bors and Sir Percival Were Fed with the Grael; but Sir Percival's Sister Died by the Way* (1864), the similarities are striking. Both artists have depicted youthful figures that are bathed in a golden haze. Their faces are softened by a subtle chiaroscuro, reminiscent of the work of Raphael.

Both Abbey and Rosetti also share a similar approach to composition. Rosetti has divided his painting into a definite foreground and background. In the background is a row of about a dozen angels, who watch the procession of the knights in the foreground. The knights approach the Virgin Mary, who holds out the Grail. In Abbey's depiction of this final achievement of the Grail, he too has chosen to fill the background with a host of angels, while Galahad and the figure of Joseph of Arimathea fill the foreground. In both images, the action takes place exclusively in the foreground, while the background provides a setting for the story.

Another similarity between Rosetti and the work of Abbey is their treatment of space in the paintings. Both have a tendency to create ambiguous backgrounds whose function to suggest setting and provide decoration, rather than define a three-dimensional space. Such is the case if one compares Rossetti's mural *Launcelot's Vision of the Sangreal* (1857) with the first scene from Abbey's mural, that of Galahad as an infant. Rosetti has described three different spaces -- heaven, a tree, and a well. None of the
three spaces has any definite connection to each other in terms of space, which is perhaps an appropriate way of depicting a vision. Similarly, the scene of Galahad as an infant has a flat blue and gold background, covered completely with decorative motifs, that doesn't suggest the presence of a physical space. Some of the other scenes of Abbey's mural do tend toward three-dimensionality, particularly those that take place in a building, such as "The Vigil of Galahad, or The Oath of Knighthood". But even in his particular case, the emphasis is less on the description of the space itself but rather on providing a decorative stage for the narrative.

Finally, Abbey's mural demonstrates his affinity for the Pre-Raphaelite palette -- rich saturated colors that are often limned with gold. In particular, Abbey appears to have adopted Rosetti's warm palette, with dominant red tones. As it turns out, this palette was well-suited to the Delivery Room with its mahogany walls and the red marble columns. Abbey's choice of a complementary palette shows his attention to the interior space that would eventually house the mural.

In addition to adopting the style of the Pre-Raphaelites, Abbey went even further in his historicism by carefully researching the costumes and visual motifs he used in his mural. Between 1892-1894, Abbey traveled to the continent of Europe with the specific purpose of gathering visual motifs to make his composition and technique true to the Italian Renaissance, and to some extent, to medieval traditions. For this purpose he traveled to Italy to study the work of the fifteenth-century Venetian painter Carpaccio. According to Hirshler, Carpaccio's St. Ursula cycle, which was a particular favorite of the Pre-Raphaelites, inspired Abbey to vary the width of the scenes in his mural.[35] Abbey
also traveled to France and studied Romanesque architecture in an attempt to lend his mural a medieval quality. The Romanesque had already found an American Renaissance expression in Richardson's Trinity Church, so it is not surprising that Abbey also looked to the Romanesque for inspiration. The Romanesque influence can be detected in the rounded arches of Abbey's background architecture, in scenes such as "The Vigil of Galahad, or the Oath of Knighthood."

Ultimately, those who would praise Abbey's mural recognized the ways in which Abbey fulfilled the American Renaissance aesthetic and themselves held to the belief that America's cultural future could be found in a European past. Abbey's critics on the other hand, believed American art should strive for a unique voice, through the use of American legends, mythologies, and histories. The voices of Abbey's supporters and critics are important because they demonstrate what was at stake in mural painting. Not only were murals places to articulate American artistic ideals, but they were spaces to assert American identity.
CHAPTER III
Murals and the Quest for an American Art

From the very beginning, Abbey's choice of the Grail legend for a public mural was debated. Art critics such as Pauline King and Henry Van Dyke praised the cosmopolitan qualities of the mural, and lauded Abbey's choice of subject. And yet other art critics, notably E. R. Pennell and Charles Shean, did not understand how the Grail story related to either the Boston Public Library or to American history. At the heart of this debate were questions of American identity. Because murals are a public art, created for communal settings, they are expected to perform a function for the community. At the turn of the twentieth century, this function was to create a national art, and in the process, instruct viewers about the mores and standards of the community that commissioned and created the murals. Abbey's supporters and critics demonstrate the two opposing views of what this national art should look like. For Abbey's supporters, murals should contribute to the development of a national art based on the cultural and artistic precedents of Europe. Abbey's critics were nationalists of a different sort, wanting to assert America's cultural prowess by elaborating on a uniquely American heritage.

In general, Abbey's supporters championed the American Renaissance and believed that American art had every right to consider itself as part of a European cultural history and should attempt to emulate European art. For Henry Van Dyke, American art naturally belonged to a cosmopolitan cultural sphere. In his article, "The Quest of the Holy Grail,"
dated April 20, 1895, he argues that Abbey's choice of subject is truly fitting because it recognizes

the great part that the Grail legend has played in the unfolding of modern literature through poems and prose romances of Britain and France and Germany. It is an acknowledgement [sic.] of the fact that American art and literature are not, and cannot be, things aboriginal and secluded, but that they must belong to the universal world of art and letters, owning the same origin and allegiance, the same impulses and laws. [36]

Van Dyke praised Abbey's use of a European legend that demonstrated the legacy that American literature owed to European writers. Abbey's supporters understood American art and culture as the inheritor of a European tradition, and believed that American artists should strive to recreate the greatness of that tradition in the United States.

Pauline King also praised the cosmopolitan features of Abbey's mural. For example, in her 1901 book, *American Mural Painting*, she commended the narrative qualities of Abbey's mural, or as she described it, his "realism." She does this by comparing Abbey's mural to European traditions, and in particular, the "much-vaunted" Panthéon in Paris.[37] Her preference for European traditions, and the use of them in American murals, is made clear in her introduction, in which she traces the history of mural painting from the Egyptians through the Renaissance masters, Giotto and Raphael, ending with a discussion of American mural painting.[38] Through the telling of this history, King makes it clear that she believes American muralists should look to Italian Renaissance models.

These cosmopolitan preferences were also more generally expressed by the artist and critic Edwin Blashfield. As he notes in his 1928 book, *Mural Painting in America,*
Here and to-day we may learn from all this past with its widely spaced periods. Our country is one of bright skies, but there is a time in our rainy eastern winters when stained glass is none too brilliant for us; while in southern California and Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, the decorator of the future will remember...Greece and Egypt with infinite advantage.[39]

For Blashfield, the standards by which all muralists, or "decorators" as he calls them, should measure themselves, are the murals of the Western tradition. Throughout his book, Blashfield emphasizes the superiority of Classical traditions, as they were expressed both by ancient cultures and during the Italian Renaissance.[40] According to Blashfield, muralists should strive to emulate European murals both their style and in their narrative.

By 1928, Blashfield's views were becoming less popular. Having been a muralist himself at the end of the nineteenth century, his views are more representative of the early years of the mural movement, and in particular, the 1890s. At the beginning of the 1890's, American mural painting was in its infancy. Although painters such as John LaFarge and William Morris Hunt had been painting murals since the 1850s, usually for church settings, it was only after the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition that the subject of mural painting gained national importance and mural paintings became commonplace in public buildings.[41]

The most remarkable feature of the Chicago Exhibition was the White City, a temporary installation of a massive plaza of buildings covered with white plaster. The interiors of these buildings were filled with murals that, in general, were consistent with the American Renaissance tradition. More often than not, the scores of artists that worked on the Chicago Exposition chose subjects or forms that were taken straight from Classical and Renaissance traditions.[42] The artist Frances Davis Millet was in charge of
mural paintings for the Exposition, and some of his own offerings included *Penelope at the Loom* and *The Return of Ulysses* for the north pavilions of the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building.[43]

This preference for European precedents at the Columbian Exposition and within the American Renaissance was undoubtedly nationalistic. Although in one respect, the use of European models in the early mural movement can be attributed to the lack of American models at the time, it also demonstrates the American Renaissance desire to place American art on the same cultural trajectory as the great art of Europe. The World's Columbian Exposition was intended to be a showcase not only of American industrial, political, and social progress, but of its growing artistic prowess. It was meant to demonstrate to the world that America had indeed established its own national artistic tradition. As the critic Pauline King understood it, the World's Columbian Exposition was the first great test of America's ability to live up to the artistic standards of European artists. Some, she noted, "doubted whether American artists had talent sufficiently broad and strong to carry them to successful achievement in this most important field."[44] Ultimately, King's verdict was that American artists were indeed up to the task, even though they were inexperienced in the mural form. King fondly muses, "...memory loves to linger upon this first effort, because it was the brave response of inexperienced men to the demands made upon them; and it appeals to our patriotism and pride...."[45] King expresses the nationalist sentiments of the American Renaissance and of early muralists; mural painting in the 1890s was guided by the desire to put American culture on the world
map, and to assert that American artists deserved to be considered in the company of the
great masters of the European tradition.[46]

Another important monument of the American Renaissance that coincided with
*The Quest for the Holy Grail* was the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., which
opened its doors in 1897. As arguably the most important library in the country, located
within the nation's capital, it is not surprising that it became a focus for nationalist pride.
As a contemporary guidebook boasted, "America is justly proud of this gorgeous and
palatial monument to its National sympathy and appreciation of Literature, Science and
Art. It has been designed and executed entirely by American art and labor."[47] And yet
for a monument that was to express American cultural achievements, the building style
looks to European artistic precedents, from Frank Weston Benson's portrayal of the three
Graces of Greek mythology in the second floor south corridor, to Robert Leftwich
Dodge's ceiling mural of Apollo the sun god in the Southeast Pavilion. Images of strictly
American experiences are rare. When images of America or American life do appear, they
are almost invariably in allegorical form, personifications of the same virtues that are
represented by the Classical art forms.

Perhaps most notable of these representations of America is found in the ceiling
mural for the Main Reading Room by Edwin Blashfield. Circling around a veiled and
classically attired female figure that represents Human Understanding, are personifications
of the great cultures of the world, including Egypt, Judea, Greece, Rome, Islam, the
Middle Ages, Italy, Germany, Spain, England, France, and America. All of the figures
have wings and classically sculpted bodies. The last figure of America is dressed as a
industrial worker, with a dynamo placed between his legs. All of these figures are approximately the same size, and it is significant that the cycle ends with the figure of America. The representation of America in this pantheon of culture demonstrates how Blashfield and his patrons wanted America to be understood: as the cultural culmination of the great civilizations of Western history.

These cosmopolitan attitudes were the norm among America's cultural elite in the early 1890s, when Abbey began his mural for the Boston Public Library. However, by the time the mural was installed in 1902, attitudes had begun to change. As it evolved as an art form, murals in America moved from allegorical and classical subjects to expositions on American history. This history as it was represented in murals came to be defined not by castles or chateaux, nor by ethereal beauties in togas, but by uniquely American experiences such as the frontier, American industry, and the particular histories of communities. One such example is Frances Davis Millet's 1906 mural for the Minnesota State Capitol, *The Treaty of the Traverse des Sioux*. For part of his life, Millet was an expatriate living in England, and was great friends with Abbey.[48] While in England, Millet exhibited his taste for European subjects and styles. However in his mural for the Minnesota State Capitol, Millet describes a gathering of ranchers and Native Americans to ratify a document that established certain rights and restrictions of the Sioux. His figures are arranged under a canopy in a circle, with a covered wagon and tipis in the background. Millet's composition and technique demonstrate his European training, particularly in the realistic modeling of his figures and his suggestion of three-dimensional space through
both linear and atmospheric perspective. However, Millet's frontier subject and setting are purely American and represent a specific event in a local history.

Abbey's critics were among those that supported this more specific description of American history, and they ultimately found Abbey's European subject to be unsuited for a public mural. As the art critic Charles Shean states in his 1904-1905 article, "Mural Painting from the American Point of View," the murals at the "beautiful Public Library at Boston ignore absolutely American literary performance and are forgetful of the brilliant group of writers that gave literary distinction to the city."[49] Shean criticizes Abbey's murals for ignoring local artistic and historical traditions in his mural. Shean implies that it is the great Bostonians of American literature, men such as Hawthorne, who deserved to have their narratives celebrated, as opposed to the dead writers of old Europe. By 1904, only two years after the installation of the murals, Abbey's American Renaissance approach no longer expressed the particular American history that critics such as Shean expected to find in murals.

Shean expresses his preference for these histories earlier in his article, when he declares,

It is a safe and reasonable forecast that the future great art of this Republic, as far as it is expressed in painting, will find its complete and full development on the walls of our public buildings, and that of necessity and from the nature of our institutions and because of the conditions under which it must be executed, it will be primarily a recording art.

That when American art has attained its full stature and entered its own, it will be simple, virile, and direct.

It will have emancipated itself from supernatural figures and accessories. It will speak no foreign accent, nor be encumbered with the theatrical properties of the schools. Except as they personify the ideals of the people, it will not need for its expression the tiresome collections of classical paraphernalia: Fame with her trumpet. The winged victory. The laurel crown and the palm of victory will fade and vanish away.[50]
For Shean, murals should express the particular histories of American communities, and free itself from "foreign" accouterments. Shean agrees with Pauline King that murals are the most effective medium for a national art, however, he believes that this national art should be based on a uniquely American idiom and find its subjects in American history. For Shean, Abbey's Grail narrative simply did not express anything that was unique to American life or history.

This same criticism was leveled at Abbey by the critic E. R. Pennell, in her 1895 article, "Mr. Abbey's Decorations for the Boston Library." She notes,

One may be inclined to question this choice [of the Grail legend] as utterly irrelevant. It is not easy to understand the relation of the Holy Grail to Boston Library. Of old, the artists, in decorating walls of church, or palace, or public hall, went for inspiration to appropriate holy legend or historic association; and no one can doubt that colonial Boston would have furnished Mr. Abbey with more than one theme made to his hand.[51]

Pennell, like Shean, argued that the most appropriate subject for public murals was one that celebrated local history and traditions. In Pennell's opinions, Abbey's mural, with its careful evocations of Renaissance figures and Romanesque interiors, did not fulfill its pedagogic function in the community, that of preserving exclusively American stories and experiences.

This emphasis on local history is even more strongly expressed in a 1906 article, "Mural Painting--An Art for the People and a Record of the Nation's Development," in which the author argues that,

...paintings on the walls of public buildings are for the people, and to the people they appeal chiefly because of beautiful symbolism or vivid recording of some historic event of which the nation or the state is justly proud. By emphasizing this link with the bygone life of the community, the pictures acquire an historical as
well as an artistic value, and take their place among the important records of a nation. [52]

According to the writer of this article, the purpose of mural painting is to represent specific people or events in American history. Paralleling Shean's critical position, the author suggests that murals had a recording function, and their purpose was to transmit the stories of America's past to future generations. Thus, in contrast to the supporters of the American Renaissance, who were interested in establishing national symbols and art forms by looking to a European heritage, other artists and writers believed American experience was something separate and unique. For these cultural nationalists, the purpose of mural painting was to celebrate American, not European, history, and The Quest for the Holy Grail, with its European narrative, did not fulfill this function. [53]

Abbey must have taken these criticisms to heart, because his next major mural project, the 1907-1911 murals for the Pennsylvania Capitol in Harrisburg, treat a group of uniquely American heroes. For his primary image, Abbey created a celestial montage of American and Pennsylvanian heroes. Although they stand and sit in an ambiguous Greek temple in a setting filled with clouds, instead of Greek muses or goddesses, the landscape is peopled with men such as Daniel Boone, William Penn, and Benjamin Franklin. The inscription accompanying the mural states, "REMEMBER THE DAYS OF OLD / CONSIDER THE YEARS OF MANY GENERATIONS/ ASK THY FATHER AND HE WILL SHOW THEE / THY ELDERS / THEY WILL TELL THEE." Abbey has a similar purpose for both the Boston and Harrisburg murals -- to capture the glory of the past.

Yet while The Quest for the Holy Grail looks to European "days of old," the Harrisburg
mural focuses on American history. While admittedly the Harrisburg murals demonstrate Abbey's earlier propensities for ethereal settings and classically molded bodies, at the same time he has apparently accepted a new mission for his murals. Instead of creating a national art out of European narratives, Abbey has chosen to focus on stories with American origins.

However, that is not to say that The Quest for the Holy Grail is any less concerned with American identity than are Abbey's Harrisburg murals. Both murals are engaged with the question, "What should a national American art look like?" At the center of this debate was how American identity should be constructed for a public setting. Both groups saw murals as a tool for both communicating and preserving a particular vision of American identity. For supporters of the American Renaissance, American identity was understood as inseparable from a European heritage, while for others, American identity was rooted in American soil, and in American accomplishments.
CHAPTER IV

Palace and Pulpit:

Murals, Missionaries, and the Boston Public Library

At the 1888 dedication of the cornerstone of Boston's new library building, Oliver Wendell Holmes proudly declared of the city, "Here freedom found her virgin home,-- / The Bethlehem where her babe was born."[54] This combination of democratic and Christian tropes to describe Boston found further expression in the institutional practices and artistic expressions of the Boston Public Library. In late-nineteenth century, the library became a pulpit for an oratory that propagated democratic values while preaching the Protestant doctrines of the social elite. Yet the democratic ideology of social equalities, which assumes that every individual has the personal freedom to direct his or her life, was in conflict with the evangelizing spiritual ideals that were proclaimed by the founders of the library. This ideological tension between egalitarian and elitist ideals was at times criticized by late nineteenth-century observers. However, because the library was financially and politically supported by Boston's social elite, the library's policies and practices were shaped by its Protestant beliefs. The art of the Boston Public Library also supported these ideals, and in the process, became a mechanism for cultural transformation, as the social elite encouraged the non-elite classes to conform to their particular brand of Protestantism. The doors of the library were open to anyone, regardless of his or her social status, but once there, the library patron was expected to
kneel at an elitist shrine of knowledge and meditate on Protestant art, including the *Quest for the Holy Grail*.

From the very beginning, the Boston Public Library was described as an egalitarian institution. For example, at the 1858 dedication of Bates building, Boston's Mayor Rice declared,

>This building is committed to your charge as the property of the people; its privileges are to be as free as air, as universal as our population. The rich and the poor are to be alike welcome at its doors, the high and the lowly born, the masses who wield the hammers of toil, and the unenvied few who are reared in affluence and ease. Genius know no rank, but chooses her votaries from all. Here she shall henceforth spread her perpetual banquet.[55]

Using democratic rhetoric such as the phrase, "property of the people," Mayor Rice eloquently defines the library's ideal constituency, one that embraces all people, without regard to their social position. Oliver Wendell Holmes also used democratic diction to describe the library. In his dedicatory poem for the library, he declares in the eighth stanza, "Behind the ever-open gate / No pikes shall fence a crumbling throne, / no lackeys cringe, no courtiers wait,— / This palace is the people's own." Holmes argues that the library should not be a place where privileged knights and ladies wait. Rather, the library is ideologically fashioned as a "palace" of culture and learning that should be accessible to both peasant and prince.

This entreaty that the library should serve all of the populace was, in some respects, taken to heart by the founders of the library, who made a conscious effort to make the library accessible to all classes. Their efforts were particularly successful with regard to the plan of the new building. During construction of the new library building, there were objections that the new library was making no accommodations to separate the
users of the upper and lower classes. In the older Bates Library Building, the library had been divided into an upper and lower hall. The more elite classes used the upper hall and the working classes used the lower hall. There were no plans to separate these different groups in the new library building, which caused considerable protest. As a writer in the Jan. 4, 1892 Boston Daily Globe argued, "[in the new library] the people not over blessed with the world's goods [will]...have to...rub elbows with the Beacon St. swell, the teacher and the varying classes of people who are now accommodated in Bates Hall, upstairs, and are away from the plain people, who are glad to avail themselves of the 'lower hall.'"[56] In a patronizing fashion, this writer asserted that the literal separation of privileged and underprivileged users in the old library was for the good of the poor, who would be uncomfortable "rubbing elbows" with more refined library patrons.

The founders fought against such as separation and maintained that "the new building is built for the accommodation of all the citizens of Boston, without reference to the so-called 'class' or condition;...and that they would be false to their trust if they made any regulation which might result in an apparent separation of the poorer users of the Library from the richer."[57] The library's builders ultimately remained true to this mission; the new library made no architectural accommodations for the different classes.

While in some respects the founders of the Boston Public Library were able to maintain the egalitarian spirit of the library, it is important to remember that these same founders owed personal and financial allegiance to the financial, political, and cultural elite that envisioned and created the library. An inevitable tension between an elite patronage and a supposedly egalitarian audience did not go unnoticed by Bostonians. This
problematic relationship between the culturally privileged founders and the democratic public was particularly evident at the opening reception for *The Quest for the Holy Grail* on April 25, 1895.

The architects, McKim, Mead and White, gave a reception this evening in the beautiful Public Library to Abbey and Sargent, the painters, whose decorative work was unveiled for the first time. There were two hundred guests, men and women, forty of whom came over from New York for the night. It was a splendid affair of brilliant jewels and costumes which can never be repeated, for the building now becomes the People's Palace, making further fashionable exclusion there impossible....[58]

While in principle the library would be available for anyone to use, only those of a certain status were invited to the gala. In fact, this particular celebration ignited a heated debate about the reality of the library's democratic ideals, and the director of the library, Samuel Abbott, resigned in disgust over the incident.[59]

The problems caused by the April 1895 reception underscore the fact that though democratic in its assumed audience, the democracy articulated by the library was defined by its elite founders. While the democratic spirit of the library was inscribed into the Copley Square facade with the words, "THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF THE CITY OF BOSTON BUILT BY THE PEOPLE AND DEDICATED TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF LEARNING," the Boylston Street facade reads, "THE COMMONWEALTH REQUIRES THE EDUCATION OF ALL PEOPLE AS THE SAFEGUARD OF ORDER AND LIBERTY." Therefore, while the library attracted patrons from all classes, the "learning" to be shared with that audience was specifically intended to safeguard and protect the prevailing social order, and by extension, the cultural and political power of Boston's social elite.
Those who specifically defined the library's "curriculum" were its librarians, who regulated access to knowledge according to the cultural and religious values of the social elite. As library historian Dee Garrison observes in her book, *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920*, librarians during the early library movement adopted a particular mission to raise the cultural taste of the public, a mission described in both elitist and religious terms. According to the rhetoric of the late-nineteenth century, "the town librarian should be the literary pastor of the town; he must be able to become familiar with his flock...to select their reading, and gradually to elevate their taste."[61] This sentiment is even more strikingly expressed by a contributor to the *Library Journal* of 1896, who stated that "[i]f the school-house and the church made New England, the public library preserves it."[62] Librarians viewed themselves as both gatekeepers and monarchs of the world of knowledge, with the power to restrict and direct what the public read. Garrison notes that in the 1890s, librarians made a concerted effort to restrict the readership of popular novels, particularly those best sellers that rejected "traditional authority, particularly in domestic life," "religious faith," and "matters concerning class distinction."[63] In other words, many librarians saw themselves as cultural warriors protecting the integrity of the religious and cultural values of the social elite.

With the librarians serving as pastor, and the library patrons serving as the flock, the library itself was the church. Indeed, from its early beginnings, the Boston Public Library was compared to religious institutions and sanctuaries. In 1858, at the dedication of the Boylston Street Library Building, the Hon. C. Winthrop quotes Bacon: "[L]ibraries
are as the shrines, where all the relics of the ancient saints, full of true virtue, and that
without delusion or imposture, are preserved and reposed."[64] For Winthrop, the
collections of the Boston Public Library were akin to objects of spiritual power, and the
library was their reliquary.

Yet the library was envisioned as more than a mere repository for the spiritual
values of Boston's social elite, but like a church, was expected to be a place of
transformation where the lower classes would ultimately aspire to higher ideals. This
purpose is cogently observed by art historian Sally M. Promey, in her book Painting
Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent's Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public
Library. According to Promey, the Boston Public Library was specifically discussed as a
place where a more refined culture could be disseminated to the masses, a place where the
values and tastes of the cultural elite could filter to the lower classes and transform their
behavior.[65]

This transformative function, so aptly noted by Promey, is expressed by art
historian Pauline King in 1901, when she observed that the library is "...an architectural
triumph, perfect complete, a model of elegance and unpretentiousness which is the essence
of the finest taste. Such an edifice in a great city is a distinct educational factor, and is of
incalculable benefit in raising the public standards." The "public standards" were in
particular, those of the lower classes, such as the policeman in an oft repeated anecdote,
quoted in the article of an Evening Transcript journalist.

A striking example of the effect of environment was noted in the new library this morning.
A reader, seeking the registration room, asked one of the stately policemen adorning
opening day, "Which way shall I go to the desk where we are to take out books?" He
replied affably, "I ain't had no instructions yet." Then the academic atmosphere of the place swept over his spirit and he stood corrected before himself. "I haven't had no instructions yet," he called softly after the vanishing reader, with an accent of exquisite content. It was testimony to the influence of the library which words cannot express. [66]

While this narrative is surely apocryphal, it illustrates the imagined transformative powers of the library space. In the policeman's case, these powers, specifically, touched his "spirit," again alluding to the spiritual definition of the library space. This experience was sufficient to awaken a more refined, educated grammar. Most striking is the "exquisite content" of the policeman afterwards. The policeman's experience of the library not only sharpened his mind, it soothed his soul. As a result, the policeman's experience transformed his social habits; he no longer spoke in the manner expected of a lowly Bostonian policeman.

Implicit to this cultural transformation was an acceptance of specifically Protestant doctrines and values. As historian Sidney Ditzion has argued, libraries in New England at the end of the nineteenth century were enlisted in a "crusade" against the growing population of Catholics in New England. [67] Between 1890 and 1917, an estimated 18,000,000 immigrants flooded into the United States, many of whom settled in the great urban cities of the northeast, such as New York and Boston. Of those immigrants, only approximately 20 percent came from Northern Europe. [68] As a result, Catholicism was on the rise in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Many of the Boston elite, the heirs to the Puritan traditions of New England, interpreted this increasing pluralism as a threat, not only to their racial and linguistic dominance, but to their religious hegemony. Ultimately, the library was ideologically guided by fears and prejudices against Catholic
immigrants. This deeply anti-Catholic sentiment was expressed by supporters of the library such as Judge C. E. Forbes of Northampton, who donated money for a large collection of books to the library. While Forbes declared that his collection should be impartial with respect to discipline or theological orientation, at the same time he expressed specific Protestant views on the purpose of the library. As he describes it,

It has been my aim to place within reach of the inhabitants of a town, in which I have lived long and pleasantly, the means of learning, if they are disposed to learn, the marvelous development of modern thought, and enable them to judge the destiny of the race on scientific evidence, rather than on metaphysical evidence alone. The importance of the education of the people cannot be overrated. It will be found the most efficient if not the only protection against the inroads of a foreign superstition, whose swarms of priests, Jesuits, monks, ministers and agents are let loose upon us, and engaged in the unholy work of enslaving the minds of the multitude, and moulding them into instruments of priestly power...Let it be deeply graven on the mind, that no strictly Roman Catholic country ever was, or ever can be a free country.[69]

The library became a means of combating the rise of Catholicism in Boston, and presumably, to ultimately convert Catholics to Protestantism, in an effort to maintain the religious standards of Boston's elite.

Ultimately, the Boston Public Library was a place where the pressures of religious pluralism could be negotiated and controlled by the social elite. For the trustees of the library, this control was accomplished through the building itself, particularly through the imagery of its mural cycles -- cycles such as John Singer Sargent's The Triumph of Religion for the Special Collections hall. Commissioned at the same time as The Quest of the Holy Grail, Sargent's murals describe in detail many of the religions of the Western World. His figures are both allegorical and religious, clothed in rich reds and browns.

These figures represent Near Eastern religions, Judaism, and Catholicism. Sally Promey
argues that, in John Singer Sargent's murals, pluralism is mediated by his creation of an intellectual space where a plurality of religions can be confronted, a place where the "religious 'other' could be contemplated as an object of study without the obligation of crossing over real religious and political boundaries in the actual world."[70] Sargent insures that these boundaries are not crossed by making it visually clear that Christianity is triumphant. The crucified figure of Christ, occupying one wall at the end of the hall, reminds the viewers that despite the attractiveness of other religions, Christianity is the true religion.

When religious boundaries were crossed, scandal ensued. Such was the case with Frederick MacMonnies' Bacchante, which he sculpted in 1893 for the main courtyard of the library. Bacchante, which depicts a dancing nude female holding an infant fawn and a bunch of grapes, caused considerable scandal, as is discussed in an article by the art historian Julia Rosenbaum.[71] Rosenbaum traces the civic controversy that erupted when MacMonnies' statue was unveiled. This controversy was primarily fostered by members of Boston's social elite, who feared that the statue would encourage licentious behavior among members of the lower-class who might come in contact with it.[72] In particular, critics objected what they perceived was the statue's glorification of wine and paganism, while others objected to the nudity of the female figure. In the words of one critic, the statue was "treason to purity and sobriety and virtue, and Almighty God."[73] These protests over the implied drinking and revelry of The Bacchante had a distinctly Protestant bouquet. Catholics, who used wine during the mass, were perceived to be some of the main culprits of drunkenness. Temperance, on the other hand, was embraced
as a Protestant value. While McKim and the trustees of the library considered these Protestant objections to be uninformed, the uproar eventually led to the sale of the statue to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 1897. This demonstrates that not only did artists need to worry about pleasing their commissioners, but they needed to appease the powerful social elite that helped to pay for the library.

Abbey, who worked on his mural during The Bacchante controversy, must have been aware of the Protestant requirements of Boston's social elite. While Sargent's murals remove the threat of spiritual pluralism by encouraging contemplation of the religious "other," Abbey's Quest for the Holy Grail functions differently, by glorifying what had come to be understood as a Protestant narrative. In fact, in Victorian England, the Arthurian legend became one of the most common vehicles for Protestant religious expression. As a secular narrative with spiritual implications, the Grail story did not carry the burden of Catholic tradition. Indeed, artists who chose to represent the Arthurian story were careful to eliminate any specifically Catholic iconography from their images. For example, the artist William Dyce, who painted an image of the Grail legend for the Queen's Robing Room at Westminster, made sure that his descriptions of the Grail story did not include images of Mary and the saints, focusing only on Jesus and the four gospel writers. Working in England, Abbey would have certainly been aware of the particularly Protestant undertones of the Arthurian legend in nineteenth-century England. And Abbey, like Dyce, uses no overtly Catholic symbols. The only haloed figures in the cycle are the angels. No other saints appear; Jesus is not even present. Although
undoubtedly a spiritual quest, the spirituality is devoid of any of the overt trappings of the Catholic tradition.

Not only was Abbey's subject an accepted Protestant one, but Abbey's own comments indicate that his choice of subject was directly influenced by the "moral worth" that he attributed to the Grail legend. As Abbey notes in a 1895 description of the mural cycle,

...[the Grail Legend] represents the first effort of the early singers of song to divert the attention of their rude audience from deeds of violence and brutality—by holding up for their admiration the life of the 'flawless knight' -- and to impress upon them that the higher qualities of mercy, gentleness and virtue were not incompatible with deeds of the highest knightly valour.[77]

Abbey hoped that in his description of these "highest qualities of mercy, gentleness and virtue," his audience might be encouraged to emulate the chivalric valor of a knightly past. Specifically, Abbey was hoping to transform his "rude" audience -- in other words, those members of the non-elite classes who needed to be taught the proper way to behave.

This purpose is mirrored in Galahad's Quest, which ultimately led to Galahad's transfiguration. It is only when Galahad conquers both exterior and internal spiritual obstacles, and reaches enlightenment, that he beholds the Grail. This achievement ideologically mirrors the mission of the Boston Public Library -- a place that envisioned itself as a shrine of culture and knowledge, where Protestant morality would "transform" the masses in order to safeguard the ideal community imagined by the social elite. Galahad 's search for the Grail, which on a spiritual level, is ultimately a quest for wisdom and understanding, mirrors the ideal experience of the library user, who through the "light" of knowledge might also aspire to a higher status, both spiritually and socially.
While "The People's Palace" was ideologically intended for all people, its founders also had a particular purpose -- to elevate and transform the masses according to the Protestant ideals of Boston's social elite. As Oliver Wendell Holmes poeticized at the library's 1888 dedication, "Will Faith her half-fledged brood retain / If darkening counsels cloud the school?"[78] For Holmes, as for many of Boston's social elite, their Protestant faith was endangered by the perils of immigration and religious pluralism. By disseminating their Protestant values through the art of the Boston Public Library, including *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, the social elite hoped to mitigate the social pressures of a heterogeneous population, and secure their particular vision of democracy and religion.
CHAPTER V

The White Knight and the Spiritual Warrior:
Race, Masculinity, and the *Quest for the Holy Grail*

The Boston Public Library was a place of negotiation, in which the social elite attempted to control and contain the pressures of an increasingly pluralistic society. By preaching Protestant ideals and encouraging the lower classes to accept and conform to these ideals, the social elite was trying to create a more homogeneous society. Ironically, a more homogeneous society threatened the hierarchy of the classes. By definition, a social elite can only exist in heterogeneous communities with established social hierarchies. Therefore, in order to maintain their social control, the elite classes also had to adhere to a set of exclusive ideals that would characterize their unique status in society. These ideals included standards of race and masculinity, that by their very nature, excluded large segments of Boston's population -- namely, certain immigrants and women.

*The Quest for the Holy Grail* would prove to be a suitable vehicle for expressing these standards. A traditional British legend, Galahad's quest expressed the noble capacities of the Anglo-Saxon race. Since Boston's social elite was predominantly Anglo-Saxon, this legend spoke exclusively to their heritage and to their heroism. In addition to expressing racial ideals, it was important that Galahad express masculine ideals. However, Abbey's Galahad differs from the typical physically powerful heroes of contemporary mural cycles, both in his mission and in his mien. This difference can be understood as a result of the spiritual aspirations of the Boston Public Library. Galahad
did represent an ideal masculinity, but one in which masculine power was defined by spiritual rather than material accomplishment. According to constructions of masculinity at the end of the nineteenth century, a man cannot be both spiritual and physical. In Abbey's androgynous hero, spirituality and masculinity were able to coexist. Combined with his racial characteristics, Galahad's successful expression of masculine spirituality helped to legitimate the power of the Anglo-Saxon elite men who founded the Boston Public Library.

Race was clearly one of the most important measures of social worth at the end of the nineteenth century, a response due in large part to the increasing numbers of immigrants that arrived in Boston during this time. As noted by art historian Sally Promey, according to the 1890 census, a full 68% of Boston's population was "foreign-born." Most of these immigrants were not from England, but rather from the rest of Europe. This large-scale immigration was perceived as a threat to the social elite of Boston.[79] In response, the elite attempted to distance themselves from these new immigrants by stressing both their Anglo-Saxon heritage and their colonial roots.

As Promey has observed, the Boston's social elite consciously identified with both their English heritage and their Puritan forefathers.[80] This sentiment was clearly expressed by one of the founders of the Boston Public Library, the Hon. Robert C. Winthrop. At the 1858 dedication of the library, he praised the library using the words of Bacon, whom Winthrop identified as the great philosopher of "our Motherland [and] the contemporary and fellow-countryman of our Pilgrim Fathers."[81] Winthrop classified
himself and his speakers as members of a certain English heritage, with long roots in the New England soil.

British heritage into quickly translated into racial identification. Such racial assumptions were vividly expressed by a great friend of Abbey, Henry James, in a 1888 letter to his brother William, "I can't look at the English and American world, or feel about them, any more, save as a big Anglo-Saxon total, destined to such an amount of melting together that an insistence on their differences becomes more and more pedantic."[82] According to James, English and American experiences could be placed on the same Anglo-Saxon historical trajectory. As noted by historian Marc Simpson, this conceptual melding of England and America into an "Anglo-Saxon total" became an opinion shared by many at the end of the nineteenth century.[83]

This "Anglo-Saxon total" was also applied to the art and architecture produced by the elite, which celebrated and idealized the English past. The Boston Public Library in particular was understood by many to be a means by which Anglo-Saxon superiority could be established in the face of racial pluralism. This sentiment was expressed by Abbey himself, when in an 1895 explanatory booklet he declared, that the library "built by a people of the British race."[84] Abbey, like many others in Boston's elite, identified with the "British race," and understood the library to be an accomplishment of that race.

It is because of this Anglo-Saxon racial identification that Abbey declares the Grail story to be a most suitable subject. Indeed, Abbey associates the Grail story, like the library, with an Anglo-Saxon tradition. In that same 1895 booklet Abbey calls "the Arthurian legend...the peculiar gift of the British race to the world's literature...both from
racial pride and from historical fact, the Grail story is peculiarly fitted to be the subject of
the decoration of a great library...."[85] Abbey not only connects the Grail legend with an
Anglo-Saxon heritage, but makes it clear that "racial pride" was one of the factors that
motivated his choice of the Grail story.

This connection of the Grail story to a racial heritage was also emphasized by the
art critic and teacher Ernest Fenellosa. In 1896, Fenellosa noted, "[h]ere [Abbey] has
chosen a noble subject -- one that appeals to the imagination, to the unexhausted
knighthood of our race."[86] Here Fenellosa directly connects Abbey's subject with an
inborn nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race. He makes it clear that the Grail legend applies
most directly to a certain segment of Boston's population -- the elite Anglo-Saxons, and
went even further to specify the "noble" men of these classes.

Beyond choosing a subject that could be identified with a particular racial
heritage, Abbey also emphasizes racial characteristics through the figure of Galahad.
Visually, one of Galahad's defining attributes is his race. Abbey has painted a knight blond
and fair, with pale, almost translucent skin. In his coloring and features, Galahad is the
epitome of Anglo-Saxon manhood. In his representation of Galahad, Abbey was working
within precedents for representing medieval subjects with Anglo-Saxon physical attributes.
As noted by art historian Kymberly Pinder, artists such as Toby Rosenthal, in his 1875
portrayal of Galahad's mother Elaine, demonstrated an almost obsessive desire to capture
an "authentically Arthurian, Anglo-Saxon head."[87] By emphasizing the Anglo-Saxon
features of their medieval heroes, artists were highlighting the British origins of these
narratives.
In addition, as Pinder observes, Abbey emphasizes Galahad's race by highlighting his genealogy. The first scene of the mural, "The Vision, or the Infancy of Galahad," shows a nun holding the infant Galahad as he beholds a vision of the Grail. This scene establishes that Galahad is predestined to be the finder of the Grail. This predestination is by virtue of his birth. The son of Lancelot, and according to Tennyson, the descendant of Joseph of Arimathea, Galahad possessed a bloodline that destined him to spiritual greatness. Pinder argues this emphasis on bloodline mirrors Abbey's emphasis on the racial origins of the Grail narrative. Just as Galahad was born to a great future, so are all members of the Anglo-Saxon race.

In the figure of Galahad, members of Boston's social elite found a hero whose particular noble achievements could be claimed for all members of that race, at least, all of its male members. For Galahad was more than an Anglo-Saxon knight; he was male, and his virtues belonged primarily to members of his particular sex. Just as Galahad's race helped the social elite to establish its superiority in the face of a racially heterogeneous society, Galahad's manhood provided a standard of vigor and virtue that was inaccessible to women. Thus, while Galahad's story was one of spiritual transformation, Galahad's example of this transformation was one that could only be embraced by Anglo-Saxon men. And just as The Quest for the Holy Grail was put in the service of racial identification, Abbey's mural helped to support the masculine pride of the founders of the Boston Public Library.

From the very beginning, the Boston Public Library was envisioned as a place that would serve the interests of men. In 1841, at a meeting at the Boston Mercantile Library,
it was resolved that the Boston Public Library was a worthy enterprise, deserving of "the
attention of every man who has a faculty to educate, or a child whom he desires should
grow to the intellectual stature of manhood."[89] These words demonstrate the
widespread attitude, noted by historian Michael Kimmel, that matters of the intellectual
sphere belonged to men.[90] The library was ideologically constructed as a place that
would most benefit the masculine mind.

This was in spite of the fact that women not only made up the majority of the
reading audience in America from the mid-nineteenth century, but that women dominated
the library profession in terms of numbers.[91] In 1878, it is estimated that two-thirds of
library workers were women, and by 1910, that figure was 78.5%.[92] However, as
architectural historian Abigail Van Slyck has noted, throughout the end of the nineteenth
century, library leaders supported a gendered hierarchy, in which men dominated
executive and management roles.[93]

In response to the growing number of women in the library profession, Van Slyck
argues that men such as Melvil Dewey sought to establish the profession of librarian as
one belonging to the male sphere.[94] In particular, Dewey used military rhetoric to
describe the profession. He made claims such as, "the great librarian...must have a head as
clear as the master in diplomacy; a hand as strong as he who quells the raging mob or
leads great armies onto victory; and a heart as great as he who, to save others, will, if need
be, lay down his life."[95] Dewey clearly envisioned the ideal librarian as a male warrior
capable of great courage. That is not to say that Dewey was opposed to women serving
as librarians, but he felt it was necessary to establish that librarianship was a masculine profession, and that being a librarian in no way diminished one's masculinity.

This preoccupation with manhood in the face of the changing professional and cultural positions of women at the end of the nineteenth century was not limited to librarians. As historians such as Michael Kimmel and Gail Bederman have observed, men during this time were asserting their status and identity in virtually every part of their lives -- in their professional roles, religious experiences, and recreational activities.[96] This preoccupation with defining one's masculinity is evident in public murals from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Murals became places to assert American superiority by highlighting the successes of American men, usually emphasizing their material and historical successes. This description of manhood would become an established norm in public mural cycles. Such is the case in Edwin Howland Blashfield's 1895-1896 representation of America for the main reading room of the Library of Congress. Breaking with earlier traditions of representing America as the female figure of Columbia, Blashfield has created a male allegorical figure with contemporary, rather than Classical attributes. In Blashfield's image, it is a young, muscular, white American worker, straddling a dynamo, who personifies America. Blashfield is clearly equating American identity with the economic progress and the American men who run the machines of industry. Furthermore, by positioning the dynamo between the legs of his figure, Blashfield also suggests a connection between American male sexuality and American material progress.
This material vision of American progress is similarly emphasized in Abbey's 1907-1911 mural, *The Apotheosis of Pennsylvania*, in the interior of the Pennsylvania state capitol. Here Abbey emphasizes the heroes of American material and political might -- politicians, explorers, soldiers, and industrialists. For the primary mural in the rotunda, Abbey arranged important historical figures in the history of Pennsylvania on the steps of an idealized classical building. Behind the figures of historical Pennsylvanians, Abbey arranged figures of the founding Fathers seated in marble thrones, and above these figures stand great explorers such as Sir Walter Raleigh and Daniel Boone. Against a background of a cloud-filled sky, a female allegorical figure of liberty crowns the composition. In this imagined assemblage of the great men of European, American, and Pennsylvanian history, Abbey reminds the viewer of the accomplishments past and present that have contributed to the progress of Pennsylvanian and American democracy. The fact that only one female figure is present in the vast allegory is significant, for Abbey's history of American progress is undeniably a male history, in which men are solely responsible for America's political and economic successes.

The unabashedly male nature of America's progress is further emphasized by another allegorical mural by Abbey for the Harrisburg rotunda, *The Spirit of Vulcan, The Genius of the Workers in Iron and Steel*. Watched over by the idealized figure of Vulcan, classically rendered men, with clearly defined musculature, labor over an anvil and are framed by industrial machinery in the background. These half-nude men of iron demonstrate the physicality and virility of those Americans who are responsible for the progress of industry in America. In this representation of a muscular and virile masculine
body type, Abbey was keeping with the prevailing belief at the turn of the century that male power was epitomized by a physically powerful body. As discussed by historian Michael Kimmel, the worth of a man at the end of the nineteenth century became closely linked not only to his material and economic successes, but to his physical presence. Kimmel notes that at this time the body no longer merely contained the man; now the body was the man.

In contrast to this muscular definition of manhood, Abbey's Galahad seems feeble. Young and fair, with a somewhat diaphanous appearance, Abbey's Galahad does not look like he could physically overpower anyone. His lack of physical presence would seem to disqualify Galahad to serve as a vehicle to express the masculine aspirations of the founders of the Boston Public Library. However, art critics found much that was masculine in Abbey's *Quest for the Holy Grail*. For example, Charles Caffin remarked that the mural represented the "force of full and fervid manhood," and that Abbey's decorations were "full of vital force." Henry Van Dyke echoed this sentiment when he noted, "The Grail hero is an ideal knight. He represents the best...of manhood," and Henry James declared Galahad to be the "incarnation of ideal knighthood."

Galahad did indeed represent an ideal masculinity, albeit very different from the more physical masculinity that was prevalent in other mural cycles. This can largely be attributed to the spiritual purposes of Abbey's mural for the Boston Public Library. The library was envisioned as a place to disseminate Protestant values and to encourage the populace of Boston to adopt greater spiritual ideals.
One of the most essential of Galahad's spiritual characteristics is his sexual purity. A pivotal scene in Abbey's narrative is Galahad's denial of Blanchefleur. Galahad's marriage to his true love is doomed when he realizes that he must deny himself the pleasures of the marriage bed, since only a Virgin Knight may achieve the spiritual perfection necessary to achieve the Grail. In this emphasis on Galahad's chastity, Abbey reinforces the nineteenth-century belief that in order for men to achieve their greatest potential, they had to exercise sexual self-control. During this time, medical experts believed that the body's energy was finite, and that sexual behavior depleted this male "nerve energy."[102] Sexual acts created an "energy drain," preventing men from reaching the highest levels of achievement in society and in the workplace. The sexually restrained man, however, was able to achieve great things, just as Galahad, in his denial of Blanchefleur, eventually achieved the Grail.

This doctrine of sexual restraint underscores the nineteenth-century belief that male purity was active, achieved through the dominance of the will over physical desire. The active nature of purity is emphasized in Abbey's murals by his use of color. One of the most striking visual elements of Galahad is his red robe, which consistently distinguishes him from the other figures in the murals. A 1936 explanatory booklet on the murals notes, "In Christian symbolism red is the color of spiritual purity. It is not the color of passive purity, of mere innocence, as white is. It stands for activity, conflict, human effort, with the knowledge of good and evil that imparts the strength to achieve the good and resist the evil."[103] Galahad wears the red of a spiritual warrior, whose purity is an achievement, rather than an inherent attribute of his character.
In contrast, Blanchefleur wears the white robes of a passive purity. She is innocent, and as an innocent, should best leave physical and moral exertions to her husband. Blanchefleur sits quietly, a wreath of roses in her hair and roses in her lap, while Galahad walks away. Blanchefleur has no voice in Galahad's decision; instead her husband is left to act on his own desire and conscience. Her quiet acceptance of Galahad's decision demonstrates the feminine ideal that was constructed by the late-nineteenth century male elite. For these elite men, the perfect woman was one who accepted the decisions of men without argument. For the late nineteenth-century female viewer, Abbey's representation of the feminine encouraged women to adopt a passive role in their interactions with men, thus supporting the gendered hierarchy that was present among Boston's elite.

While Galahad's purity was an important element of the nineteenth-century masculine ideal, Galahad's virginity prevented Abbey from portraying the knight's physical features in overtly masculine terms. During the late nineteenth century, Americans drew explicit connections between inward virtue and outward appearance. As noted by historian George L. Mosse, "Masculinity was regarded as of one piece from the very beginning: body and soul, outward appearance and inward virtue were supposed to form one harmonious whole, a perfect construct where every part was in its place."[104] In other words, the body itself became a symbolic space and a man's physical features came to be interpreted as a demonstration of his inward virtues.

Ironically, while virtue was prized in men, visual representations of virtue were feminine and representations of vice were masculine. This gendered categorization of virtue and vice is clearly portrayed in Abbey's mural cycle. One of Galahad's challenges on
his quest is to defeat the seven vices, represented by well-armored knights, who are
imprisoning the virtues, represented by beautiful maidens. Galahad's defeat of these
masculine vices and release of the feminine virtues is pivotal to the success of his quest for
the Grail. However, the fact that virtue was culturally coded as feminine made Galahad's
physical features somewhat problematic. Abbey had to find a way to reconcile Galahad's
physical features with his "feminine" virtue, while still representing Galahad as a masculine
ideal.

This challenge was made even more difficult by another masculine ideal that prized
virility, as opposed to chastity, in men. While many were arguing that men should limit
their sexual activities, there was others who argued that men should exercise their virile
impulses as much as possible. Men such as Theodore Roosevelt argued that not only was
male sexuality a natural extension of a man's masculinity, but that Anglo-Saxon men had a
responsibility to propagate their race.[105] Roosevelt feared that the forces of
industrialization had weakened American men, maintaining that men could reclaim their
physical manhood through the exercise of their heterosexuality.

This virile male was described in physically powerful terms. This physicality is
particularly evident in portrayals of Sir Lancelot, Galahad's father. In contrast to Galahad,
whose defining feature was his purity, Lancelot is best remembered for falling prey to his
lusts for women. In contemporary representations, Lancelot is always portrayed with long
dark hair and a mustache, such as in Howard Pyle's 1907 illustrations for The Story of Sir
Launcelot and his Companions. Lancelot's towering figure and particularly his facial
hair[106] were markers of his virility and physical strength. The same physical features
are present in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's drawing of *Sir Launcelot in the Queen's Chamber* from the mid-nineteenth century. Rossetti makes the connection between Lancelot's virility and his physical appearance even more potent by placing Lancelot within the queen's bedchamber.

Abbey thus faced two important tasks in his representation of Galahad. On one hand he had to distinguish Galahad from the virile masculine type. On the other hand he had to reconcile the feminine quality of Galahad's chastity with his masculine identity. Abbey's solution was to represent Galahad as an androgynous type -- fair, young and beardless. As Pauline King, writing in 1901, describes him, Galahad's face, "in its pure oval...[is] surrounded by a frame of soft blond hair...[it] is a most beautiful one."[107] Using gendered adjectives such as "soft" and "beautiful," King aptly describes the effeminate quality of Galahad's features.

In his decision to describe Galahad as an androgynous figure, Abbey was working within an iconographical tradition. Indeed, virtually all nineteenth-century representations of Galahad show Galahad as an androgynous type. These works are an important precedent because not only do they portray Galahad as androgynous, they do so in a manner that emphasizes his spiritual purity. From his time in England, Abbey would have been familiar with works by artists such as George Frederick Watts, Edward Burne-Jones, and Joseph Noel Paton. In Watts' 1862 image of *Sir Galahad*, Galahad's spirituality is suggested by the white cloud surrounding his head like a halo.[108] Burne-Jones, in his 1858 image, is even more specific in his depiction of Galahad's spirituality, emphasizing Galahad's sexual purity by contrasting the solitary figure of Galahad in the foreground.
with groups of lovers in the background. However, Paton's 1884 painting of *Sir Galahad and the Angel* is the most explicit in its connections between Galahad's androgyny and his spirituality. In this image, Galahad's features are almost identical to those of the angel, a traditionally androgynous figure. Thus, not only is Paton describing Galahad's angelic nature, he is also suggesting that Galahad, like the angel, is ambiguously gendered. The great number of artists that chose to represent Galahad as an androgynous figure demonstrates the power of gendered paradigms in the nineteenth century. As other artists had recognized before him, Abbey understood that in order for Galahad to serve as a model of sexual purity, Galahad could not possess the physically powerful body type that was already clearly connected to the masculine ideal of virility.

While the founders of the Boston Public Library did not explicitly require Edwin Austin Abbey to express certain ideals in his work, as a member of the same social elite who commissioned his services, he consciously expressed the aspirations of this group of men. Like men throughout all segments of American society at the end of the nineteenth century, the founders of the library were concerned with establishing their masculinity. However, because of the spiritual goals of the Boston Public Library, their masculinity required a different kind of hero -- one whose achievements in the spiritual realm would inspire men to embrace the intangible virtues of the soul. In Galahad, Abbey captured a hero that embodied both spiritual virtue, and in the words of the art critic Pauline King, "noble-minded, fearless manhood...."[109] However, in order for Abbey's representation to be successful, he had to capture Galahad's virtuous qualities without threatening the ideal of masculine strength and virility. Ultimately, in his androgynous hero, Abbey was
able to set Galahad apart from the other heroes of American political and economic progress. Thus sanctified, Galahad was able to serve as a symbol of American and Anglo-Saxon religious achievement, and as a model for the spirituality of Boston's male social elite.
CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

The Boston Public Library, as with many American public institutions, professed certain democratic ideals, embracing an egalitarian constituency and the right of the individual to use the library according to his or her specific needs. This ideal was eloquently expressed by Josiah Benton, a board member of the library trustees since 1894, and its president from 1908-1917. He wrote:

In the aggregate of all its services, the Boston Public Library should be and I believe is a system of education for all and free to all. The distinguishing characteristic of the education given by a public library is that it is not imposed upon the person who has it...[S]chools must educate persons in classes and upon general lines of knowledge. The Library, however, educates only in response to individual wants and demands. Everything that is done by it is done in response to requests from individuals who ask for that which they each want most.[110]

According to Benton, the Boston Public Library was without a social agenda. Rather, it was democratic in the truest sense, allowing individuals to decide how, and for what purpose, they interacted with the library. Yet despite these well-intentioned ideals, the trustees of the Boston Public Library could not escape the fact that like any public space, the library was a place of social negotiation. While the library serviced a wide community, the administration and construction of the library was in the hands of Boston's financial, political, and cultural elite. Ultimately, the library supported an elite construction of American identity that was disseminated to the many different social groups that used the library.
Within the hallowed walls of this People's Palace, the founders of the library presented their audience with a vision of the perfect citizen, in an attempt to assimilate the growing diverse populations of Boston. Essential to this model of citizenship was Protestantism, a religious ideal that was preached both through the work of librarians, and through the artistic expressions of the library. In addition to this cultural proselytizing, Boston's elite was concerned with protecting its social status through the ideological assertion of its Anglo-Saxon, masculine identity.

Edwin Austin Abbey, as a member of Boston's elite, shared this vision of the ideal American. Thus, regardless of whether or not Abbey intended his mural to accomplish particular social or political goals, The Quest for the Holy Grail was nevertheless an expression of socially determined paradigms. Abbey's mural celebrated an ideal of Protestant, Anglo-Saxon manhood and in doing so, entered a discourse about social privilege of Boston's elite. Those who viewed his mural, whether they were men or women, rich or poor, Protestant or Catholic, came away with the understanding that the founders of the Boston Public Library, the "guardians" of their access to knowledge, privileged a type of person with particular religious, racial, and gendered attributes.

However, Josiah Benton's ideal of individual determination was realistic in one important sense. While the trustees of the library created an environment that promoted their elite values, the individual still had the right to respond to that environment in his or her own way and to accept or reject the ideological constructions presented by the library. In this study, I have focused on how Abbey's mural reacted and responded to its elite audience, and how, in turn, that audience received The Quest for the Holy Grail.
However, it would be illuminating to examine how women, immigrants, children, and non-Bostonians received Abbey's work. Their voices can testify to the other American stories shaped by Abbey's *Quest for the Holy Grail*. 
NOTES


[8] See Foster and Quick.


[10] Ibid., 46-47.


[14] Whitehall, 1. See also Wick, 11.

[15] The other libraries with more than 50,000 volumes were the Yale College Library, the Philadelphia Library Company, and the Library of Congress. See Whitehall, 2.


[21] Ibid., 737-738.

[22] Ibid., 743-745. See also Wick, 13.
[23] Whitehall, 140.

[24] During the 1870s, American Renaissance artists had yet to achieve a stylistic consensus such as is demonstrated of the Boston Public Library. However, this early period does demonstrate an attention to collaboration and European prototypes. See The American Renaissance, 63-64.

[25] Knowledge, the fruit of the rational intellect as opposed to the intuitive imagination, was evidently an enterprise best described as masculine. It is interesting to note that in Puvis de Chavannes' mural for the Boston Public Library, it a male figure, rather than a female figure, represents the Spirit of Enlightenment.

[26] See Promey, 106-143.

[27] Hirshler, 35.

[28] Ibid., 36.

[29] Lucas, 230.

[30] Ibid., 231.

[31] For a response to this first exhibition, see Pennell, 104-105.


[33] Lucas, 232.

[34] A good summary of the narrative of Abbey's mural can be found in A Description of Edwin Austin Abbey's Quest of the Holy Grail.


[38] Ibid., 3-14.

[40]Ibid., 3-39.

[41]King, 62.

[42]Ibid., 62-92. See Chapters IV-V.

[43]Ibid., 65, 80.

[44]Ibid., 62-63.

[45]Ibid., 80.

[46]For further discussion of the nationalism of the American Renaissance movement, see *The American Renaissance*.

[47]Cole and Reed, 32.


[50]Ibid., 26.

[51]Pennell, 104.

[52]"Mural Painting: An Art for the Nation and a Record of the Nation's Development," 60.

[53]Ibid., 54.


[55]Carpenter, 745.


[57]Whitehall, 155.

[58]Quoted in *Whitehall*, 167.
[59] Promey, 159.

[60] See Garrison.

[61] Ibid., 37.


[63] Garrison, 75.

[64] Carpenter, 747.

[65] Ibid., 173.

[66] Evening Transcript, quoted in Promey, 159.

[67] Ditzion, 61.


[70] Ditzion, 102.

[71] Rosenbaum, 41-57.

[72] Ibid., 53-54.

[73] Ibid., 41.

[74] Ibid., 55.


[77] Abbey, quoted in Pinder, 132-133.

[78] Oliver Wendell Holmes, Poem for the Dedication of the Cornerstone of the Boston Public Library, reprinted in Whitehall, 147.

[79] Promey, 213.

[80] Ibid., 155-156, 213.

[81] Carpenter, 747.


[85] Ibid.


[92] Van Slyck, 162.

[93] Ibid., 164.

[94] Ibid., 161.


[97] Kimmel. See chapter four for a discussion of the masculine physical ideal at the turn of the century.

[98] Ibid., 127.

[99] Caffin, supp. 79.

[100] Van Dyke, 370.


[102] Kimmel, 45-46. See also Bederman, 82-83.


[105] Bederman, 204-205.

[106] See Kimmel, 122-123, for a discussion of the connection between facial hair and manliness.

[107] King, 123.


[110] Josiah Benton, quoted in Promey, 147.
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