

# ASA AMES OCCUPATION SCULPTURING

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## ASA AMES: OCCUPATION SCULPTURING

Asa Ames is a mysterious and tragic figure. The young sculptor died from consumption when he was 27 years, 7 months, and 7 days old. Though his own life was short, he immortalized family members and neighbors in the vicinity of Evans, Erie County, New York, in a legacy of twelve three-dimensional portraits carved between 1847 and his death in 1851. Included in the artist's small oeuvre are portraits of young men and women, but the images that linger are soulful carvings of children that seem to embody a state of childhood innocence.

During the period that Ames was working in the small town of Evans, there was little precedent for portraiture in wood. True, there were earlier representations carved in low relief into gravestones and rare portraits carved in a classical style by some talented shipcarvers, but Ames's veristic life-size bust-, waist-, and full-length portraits have few antecedents in American folk sculpture. Like much painted portraiture of the day, the representations are iconic in their pared-down simplicity and absolute frontality, lending them an air of gravitas and timelessness that imbues the carvings. The medium also affords an opportunity to introduce gesture in spatial terms that are necessarily absent from painted portraiture and that augment the air of canonical symbolism attached to the poses.

The individuation and ethereal solemnity of the carvings derive from sculptural traditions with a long lineage, from Roman portrait busts to marble statuary associated with the rural cemetery movement that was burgeoning in the 1840s. Ames's sense of himself as an artist may be gleaned in the Federal Census of 1850, in which his occupation is listed as "sculpturing." Details of Ames's history remain shrouded in shadow, but the work of his hands illuminates the meaningful and personal nature of the lives he captured so beautifully in wood.

Stacy C. Hollander  
Senior Curator

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## ASA AMES

No birth record has been found for Asa Ames, but he was probably born on or around December 28, 1823, in Evans, Erie County, New York, based on the inscription on his gravestone. Erie County itself was newly formed, carved from Niagara County to accommodate a growing population in the wake of the War of 1812 and in anticipation of Buffalo becoming the western terminus of the Erie Canal. The artist's parents, John and Susan Ames, migrated from Worcester County, Massachusetts, with two children, John Trowbridge and Emeline, in tow; their younger sons, Henry G. and Asa, were born in Evans. John Ames died about 1830; Susan Ames married Elias Babcock in 1842 and was widowed once again two years later.

The artist's whereabouts between the time of his father's death and his appearance in the Federal Census of 1850 are not known. His skilled artistry suggests that he served an apprenticeship during those years, although it is not clear in what profession. In 1847, his most prolific year, Ames carved and dated several busts of family members and a full-length figure of 3-year old Amanda Clayanna Armstrong (not on view in the exhibition). The intimate, lifelike nature of the carvings ensured that they remained with descendants for generations. As family members traveled to other parts of the country, most brought the sculptures with them, elucidating patterns of migration as Americans moved from New England to New York State's western frontier and settled farther into the interior reaches of the country. Today the paths the artworks have traced help to recover identities that have been lost to time.

The small body of twelve sculptures signed by or attributed to Asa Ames is not likely to have supported the artist into adulthood, though he may have resided primarily in other households rather than his own. Family tradition states that he was living with Dr. Thomas Armstrong while he carved the likeness of Armstrong's young daughter Amanda, and it is likely that he was living with his sister earlier the same year, when he portrayed her three children. The 1850 Census records Ames in residence at Dr. Harvey B. Marvin's home, where he may have met his future wife—and soon-to-be widow—Emma. Asa Ames died on August 4, 1851. The trace of his life, like the inscription on the stone that marks his grave in the Evans Pioneer Cemetery, is barely legible.

## OCCUPATION SCULPTURING

In the Federal Census of 1850, the only known record that lists Asa Ames by name, his occupation is noted as “sculpturing,” an intriguing term that in our modern lexicon would indicate that Ames considered himself a fine artist in a plastic medium. In the parlance of the nineteenth century, the term was hierarchical and usually reserved for sculpting in stone or metal, the mediums then associated with the aspirations of fine art. Wood was an earthbound rather than a lofty medium, used in the commercial workshops of the ship- and trade-figure carver. Though talented artists working in wood might have served apprenticeships of many years, even those who achieved critical acclaim for the skill and beauty of their carvings found the praise tempered by descriptions of their profession such as “artist in wood.”

In previous examinations, Ames has been considered within the realm of the shipcarver because he worked in wood and because of the proximity of his hometown of Evans to the city of Buffalo and its thriving port activities. Yet there is little of the aesthetic of shipcarving that can be gleaned in Ames’s artistic production. There is none of the forward thrust so typical of figureheads, and, with one exception, there are no neoclassical draperies flowing in the breeze. Sharing an aesthetic kinship with painted portraiture that today is considered in the folk art genre, Ames’s rare carved portraits are neither heroic nor idealized but honest and personal. A carving of Amanda Clayanna Armstrong suggests a conversance with antique marble sculptures. The standing child leans against a draped tablet in a slightly contraposto pose. Reinforcing an association with stone- rather than woodcarving is the lengthy inscription skillfully incised into the tablet whose style of lettering and organization relate closely to gravestones. Ames would have had little occasion to hone such lettering skills within the shipcarving trade. A survey of the Federal Census reveals that locally there were carpenters, joiners, and carriage makers. One other individual in Evans, Charles E. Gates, noted his occupation as “sculpture” in 1860, while he was living in the household of William Mathewson, master marble finisher and the only stonecutter in the area. Whether Ames trained as a carver in wood or in stone, in his own work he responded to the tenor of the time and the classically inspired sculpture that was popularized in the era of the rural cemetery movement, when marble statuary, especially of children, was much in demand to stir the emotions of the visitor contemplating the melancholy beauty of death.

## SCULPTURAL TRADITIONS

Portrait sculptures of children are not common, but they can be traced to antiquity, when such carvings appeared in a memorial context or as part of the cult of ancestor worship. Typically, the portrayals were stoic and somber; it was not until the Renaissance that a sense of animated spontaneity was introduced into sculptures of children. For a brief period of about fifty years, Florentine artists such as Desiderio da Settignano, who is often credited with inventing the genre, carved marble busts, primarily of male children, that were at once individualized and idealized—based on natural appearance but seemingly alike in their representation of childhood as a state of innocent perfection.

Asa Ames probably did not have firsthand knowledge of carved portraits from antiquity and the Renaissance, but he was no doubt aware of some art-historical precedents through their interpretations in the shipcarving arts and the works of America's earliest sculptors in marble. Artisans in wood responded to archaeological discoveries of the eighteenth century by introducing heroic attitudes and attributes into figureheads and other representational carvings. The sculptor Horatio Greenough was among the earliest American artists working in marble; he undertook to acquaint the public at large with Italianate sculpture traditions. In 1831, his composition known colloquially as the "chanting cherubs," based on a detail in Raphael's painting *Madonna del Baldacchino*, began a tour of major cities in the United States to enthusiastic reception. In 1847, Hiram Powers's marble statue *The Greek Slave* embarked on a grand tour as well. The sculpture, based on classical ideas, became wildly popular, and small-scale replicas proliferated under glass domes in homes across the country. Well-to-do Americans had been making their own grand tours of Italy since the turn of the nineteenth century, bringing a conversance of ancient ruins and Italianate arts home with them.

Commissions for marble sculptures and opportunities to view them increased dramatically with the rise of the rural cemetery movement, instigated by the establishment in 1831 of Mount Auburn in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Conceived as picturesque rambles combining art and nature, the new cemeteries were idyllic rural havens conducive to edifying and moral meditation. Marble statuary, especially memorials to children, punctuated the winding paths in accordance with the sentiment expressed by nineteenth-century landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing, who advocated ". . . the tasteful and harmonious embellishment of these sites by art."

## PHRENOLOGY

Phrenology was conceived in Vienna near the turn of the nineteenth century by Dr. Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828), whose studies into the structure of the brain led him to divide the organ into multiple “faculties” that were responsible for specific aspects of human nature and behavior. His student Dr. Johann Spurzheim (1776–1832) expanded Gall’s theories, positing that the formation of the skull conformed to the faculties and that by examining the bony configuration, an understanding could be gained of a person’s innate propensities. In the United States, phrenology was assimilated into a pluralistic medical environment whose practitioners ranged from botanical healers to “regular” doctors who graduated from medical schools. Originally introduced into the elite medical circles, by midcentury its principles and practice had been popularized to such an extent that itinerant phrenologists had penetrated even the most rural areas. This was primarily through the efforts of two brothers, Lorenzo and Orson Squire Fowler, who established a virtual industry operating from the phrenological cabinet they opened on lower Broadway in New York City. Their activities ranged from phrenological readings of individuals to a brisk business in phrenological paraphernalia and the publication of a wide variety of journals and books on subjects promoting the benefits of health food, homeopathy, hydropathy, and mesmerism, and agitating for women’s and children’s rights, sex education, and other reforms and therapies. As a result of its proliferation, phrenology lost much of its scientific credibility but played perfectly into the sense of restlessness that characterized the Age of Reform.

Phrenological heads cast in plaster or ceramic became commonplace adornments in American homes: According to an article in the *Boston Christian Examiner* in 1834, “Heads of chalk, inscribed with mystic numbers, disfigured every mantelpiece.” Asa Ames was not the only artist living before the discovery of antibiotics who might have explored unorthodox therapies for a cure for tuberculosis; portrait painter Joseph Whiting Stock also turned to “irregular” medical practices in the hopes of prolonging his life.



### **BUST OF A YOUNG WOMAN**

Attributed to Asa Ames (1823–1851)

Evans, Erie County, New York

c. 1847–1851

Paint on laminated basswood

21 × 17 ¼ × 10"

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation,

Williamsburg, Virginia, 1957.701.3

Photograph and digital image

© Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Asa Ames carved only three portraits of adults—two men and one woman—that can confidently be attributed based on construction, inscriptions, and aesthetic presentation. Although the *Bust of a Young Woman* has lost much of its polychrome surface, it is possible to make a comparison between it and others carved in 1847 because the portraits are accurate enough to note similar family features. A photograph of Ames's mother as an older woman strongly suggests that this bust depicts her daughter, Emeline. The young woman also bears an especial resemblance to Ames's sculpture of his niece Mariah Dewey (not on view in the exhibition), his sister Emeline's daughter, especially in the shape of the brows and finely chiseled nose. If the carving was indeed made at the time Ames portrayed his sister's three children in 1847, Emeline would have been 34 years of age and would already have borne four children, one of whom died young.

Emeline was born in Massachusetts, the oldest of the Ames children. She married Abner Dewey of Evans in 1834. After the senior Ames's death, the Dewey household was probably home to Emeline's brothers and mother at various times, until their own marriages and departures from Evans. Dewey was a farmer and very active in civic affairs as a coroner, a deputy sheriff, and a justice of the peace. Emeline died at the age of 70 of burns suffered after her clothes had caught on fire.



### HEAD OF A BOY

Asa Ames (1823–1851)

Evans, Erie County, New York

Dated March 1847

Paint on wood

18 x 16 ½ x 9 ½"

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown,

New York, gift of Stephen C. Clark,

No402.1955

Photo by Richard Walker

In 1847, Asa Ames portrayed the three children born to his sister, Emeline, and her husband, Abner Dewey, and may have portrayed each of his siblings as well. The strong family resemblance between this portrait and *Bust of a Young Man* (page 8), the Dewey children carvings (not on view in the exhibition), and the only known surviving photograph of the artist (shown on page 14) leaves little doubt that this sculpture is either a self-portrait or depicts one of Ames's brothers, probably Henry, who would have been around 25 years of age in 1847, when the bust was carved. Henry G. Ames married Tryphina Sly on Valentine's Day, 1847. Two years later, their daughter Susan—their only child born in Evans during Ames's lifetime—was immortalized in a full-size standing figure (illustrated on page 10). Henry was still residing in Evans in 1850 and working as a tanner, but he moved with his family to Edgar County, Illinois, sometime before 1860, where he earned a living as a shoemaker. By 1870, Henry was living with his wife and their younger children in Sherman, Texas, where he stayed the remainder of his life.





### **BUST OF A YOUNG MAN**

Asa Ames (1823–1851)

Probably Angola, Erie County, New York  
c. 1847

Paint on yellow poplar

14  $\frac{5}{8}$  × 8  $\frac{1}{4}$  × 8"

Huntington Museum of Art,

Huntington, West Virginia, funds

provided by Mr. and Mrs. Harold

Nichols and the 1978 Antiques Show

Fund

Photograph and digital image

© Huntington Museum of Art

This carving may portray Asa Ames's older brother John Trowbridge Ames, who led an adventurous and successful life. Born in Massachusetts, he was 2 or 3 years old when his parents relocated to Erie County. In his early 20s, he tried his hand as a sailor, becoming a captain on Lake Erie. He left Evans by the 1840s, teaching school in Missouri and Wisconsin before heading to California in a covered wagon with his new wife, hoping to strike gold. By 1854, John T. Ames bundled his wife, his children, and Asa's widow, Emma, into the wagon once again, and the family established one of the largest homesteads in the pioneer town of Traer, Iowa, where they became major livestock breeders. His property became known as the Larches, for the 70 wooded acres he planted.

This carving was discovered in Iowa, lending credence to its identification as that of a member of the Ames family. It has been speculated that it might be a self-portrait because of the recess possibly intended for a medallion: Asa Ames was awarded a prize for carving in the Buffalo State Fair in 1848. He was also a Son of Temperance, a fraternal organization whose regalia included a round, rayed medallion. However, the drapery wrapped around the base of the bust, uncharacteristic of the artist's work, is conventional in the shipcarving genre and may be a reference to John T. Ames's earlier experience as a ship captain.



### **BUST OF A WOMAN**

Attributed to Asa Ames (1823–1851)  
Probably vicinity of Evans, Erie County,  
New York

c. 1847–1851

Cherry wood (stripped of its original  
paint)

23 × 13 × 9"

Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis

Photo courtesy Curtis Galleries

This carving has been considered within the canon of Asa Ames's artistic output since 1982, when the first examination of his work was published in *The Magazine Antiques*. This exhibition presents the first opportunity to consider the carvings firsthand. *Bust of a Woman* shares similarities with the artist's signed and dated examples. Ames sometimes carved from one piece of wood, save for appendages such as arms; at other times, he laminated vertical boards, a technique used in this portrait and *Bust of a Young Woman* (page 6). The sculpture also shows the attention to details of dress and hair that is characteristic of Ames's work. However, this bust is carved in cherry, a wood not used in any other documented sculptures, and the delineation of the face does not display the still self-possession of the identified carvings. The idealized presentation and shaped pedestal is more consistent with portrait busts created within the shipcarving genre than the individualized portraits created by Ames.



### **SUSAN AMES**

Asa Ames (1823–1851)

Evans, Erie County, New York

Dated December 1849

Paint on wood

35 × 9 × 8 ½"

Boulder History Museum, Boulder,

Colorado, gift of Mrs. Arch Hogue Sr.,

B.156.1

Photo by Vivian Leaver-Hauschulz

Asa Ames made at least two carvings in 1849, one (illustrated on page 11) dated in June and this life-size, full-length sculpture completed in December. Continuing his practice of portraying members of his own family, Ames depicted his little niece Susan Ames, the only child yet born to his brother Henry G. Ames and Henry's wife, Tryphina Sly. As he did in all his work, Ames accurately and sensitively described details and texture of clothing and hair. The roundness of the child's face hints at her young age—she was barely 2 when the sculpture was carved. Her piercing blue eyes distinguish the girl from her brown-eyed cousins. Although she is not yet of school age, Susan is shown holding a book, perhaps a hymnal or a small Bible, and her other hand is extended in a gesture of openness, suggestive of the guilelessness of childhood. This sculpture was recently rediscovered in the collection of the Boulder History Museum, where it had been deposited in the 1960s by Mrs. Arch Hogue Sr. Susan Ames married Joe Hogue in Edgar County, Illinois, in 1864; they later moved west to Colorado.



### **NAKED CHILD**

Asa Ames (1823–1851)  
Evans, Erie County, New York  
Dated June 1849  
Paint on wood  
26 × 9 × 6"  
Private collection  
Photo by Photosphere Studio,  
Kentwood, Michigan

This lively and rotund figure was found in Michigan. It may depict LaRay Marvin, a son of Dr. Harvey B. Marvin of Evans, New York, with whom Asa Ames was living in 1850. At the time this sculpture was carved, LaRay was 7 months old. Ames captured the happy innocence of the baby in his sweetness of expression and the roundness of his flesh. The pose and presentation of the sculpture is reminiscent of Renaissance depictions of cherubs and ecclesiastical carvings of the Christ child, often making a sign of benediction. In its charming and chubby representation of the corporeality of babyhood, its open-handed gestures, and its intimation of love of knowledge expressed through the books on which the child stands, the sculpture also recalls the sense of playful naturalism introduced during the Renaissance, and the power of such effigies to help determine the character of the man the child would become. LaRay grew up to follow in his father's footsteps, studying medicine and working as a preeminent physician and homeopath. He practiced in Michigan for most of his adult years, having moved there with his family when still a child.



**SEATED FEMALE FIGURE WITH  
LAMB AND CUP**

Asa Ames (1823–1851)

Evans, Erie County, New York

Dated April 1850

Paint on yellow poplar

29 ¼ × 12 ¼ × 12"

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art,

Hartford, Connecticut, bequest of

Roscoe Nelson Gray in memory

of Roscoe Nelson Dalton Gray and

Rene Gabrielle Gray, 1978.3

Photo © Wadsworth Atheneum

It is believed that this figure was made to memorialize two young sisters, Sarah Reliance and Ann Augusta Ayer, who died in 1849, probably during the cholera epidemic that swept the Buffalo area that year. They were born into one of the founding families of Evans; their uncle Ira Ayer wrote and illustrated a journal near the end of his life, reminiscing about the pioneer years of Erie County. He and the sisters' father, James, led companies into the Civil War in the fall of 1862, although James was then approaching 50 and Ira 60 years of age. James died in 1863 in Louisiana, while Ira survived and returned to Evans.

The imagery of a child and lamb was popular in the heyday of the rural cemetery movement. Three-dimensional marble carvings of scantily clad children sleeping next to a lamb intimated the transparent innocence of childhood and a state of purity and closeness to nature. This figure, which is more actively engaged, has an ecclesiastical appearance and is unlikely to have been used as an outdoor memorial. Usually identified as female, the child may instead be John the Baptist. When depicted as a child, the Baptist is often shown with attributes of a banner or scroll, the Lamb of God, and a shell for baptizing; the loincloth recalls the swaddling cloths of the baby Jesus. Erie County is in the area of western New York State that was known as the "Burned-Over District" because of the susceptibility of its residents to religious revivalism in the nineteenth century. The Ayer family had converted to Methodism, and their religious beliefs may have contributed to the representation in this carving.





### PHRENOLOGICAL HEAD

Attributed to Asa Ames (1823–1851)

Evans, Erie County, New York

c. 1850

Paint on wood

16 ⅝ × 13 × 7 ⅝"

American Folk Art Museum, bequest of

Jeanette Virgin, 1981.24.1

Photo by John Parnell

In 1850, the phrenological institute of Fowler & Wells published a small volume that argued the benefits of hydropathy—the treatment of disease by water—in curing or preventing consumption. That same year, and only one year before his own death from tuberculosis, Asa Ames was living in the household of Dr. Harvey B. Marvin, a physician and practitioner of alternative therapies, including hydropathy. Ames may have been hoping to find a reprieve from the disease, and it is likely that the *Phrenological Head* was carved around the time of this association. The sculpture shows the quiet sensitivity, exquisite precision, and acuity characteristic of Ames's portraits of children, but the pale impassivity of the child's delicate face intensifies the strangeness of the phrenological markings, which closely follow a Fowler chart.

Harvey B. Marvin graduated from Castleton Medical College in Vermont. One of the early physicians in Evans, he formed a friendship with a prominent local lawyer and agriculturalist, Elliott Stewart, whose journals provide insights into the town's reception of Marvin's plans to open a water-cure clinic. The doctor and his growing family lived peaceably for a number of years before Reverend Morse of the First Church of Evans turned public opinion against him and his radical ideas. By 1860, Marvin moved with his family to Muskegon, Michigan, where he practiced medicine until his death in 1870. His Evans-born wife, Aurelia Tolman, is listed in the 1889 Muskegon Directory as "physician," perhaps having continued her husband's work; his three sons became prominent physicians and well-known doctors of homeopathy.



### **DAGUERRETYPE OF ASA AMES**

Artist unidentified; plate marked Scovills  
(active c. 1839–1850)

New York State

1849–1851

$3\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{4} \times \frac{5}{8}$ "

Collection of John T. Ames, Austin,  
Texas, loaned in loving memory of  
John T. and LaVeda R. Ames

Photo courtesy John T. Ames

This newly discovered daguerreotype of Asa Ames is on public view for the first time. Taken sometime between 1849 and the artist's death in August 1851, it appears to be an unusual composite of several separate elements but is more likely a carefully composed image with a distinct autobiographical quality. The artist shows himself in the act of carving a bust and surrounded by examples of his own work, as well as a bass viol. The *Naked Child* in this exhibition (illustrated on page 11) appears with his genitals modestly covered by a shawl and holding what appears to be a large hatpin or a tuning fork in one hand. The artist is working on a bust, possibly a self-portrait, positioned on the floor between his knees. The face emerging from the surrounding wood is markedly similar to the busts of two young men included in this exhibition whose features, in turn, show a strong similarity to the artist's own. Ames bears a bandage on one finger, possibly a work-related injury. The aquiline face of an unidentified man on the lower right appears to be a separate photographic image, but may be instead the result of careful positioning in the foreground. Hovering over the head of a bust of a little boy is a disembodied hand holding a book, a remnant of a sculpture (shown on page 15) that survives in the family. There is a sense of spiritualism in the image, perhaps not surprising in light of Ames's relationship with Dr. Harvey B. Marvin and in the heyday of the "Rochester Rappings," when the two Fox sisters in Rochester, New York, received tapped messages from the spirit world. The daguerreotype descended in the family of Asa Ames's brother John Trowbridge Ames.



**HAND HOLDING BOOK**

Asa Ames (1823–1851)

Evans, Erie County, New York

c. 1847–1851

Wood

8 × 6 × 3 ¼"

Collection of John T. Ames, Austin,

Texas, loaned in loving memory of

John T. and LaVeda R. Ames

Photo by David M. Stephens

This carving is seen in the daguerreotype illustrated on page 14.