



44: William Ordway Partridge *Memory* (1914)

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“James George Averell Dead: Well-Known Polo Player Succumbs to Typhoid Fever,” announced a headline in *The New York Times* of November 21, 1904. Today, visitors to the Memorial Art Gallery may not realize that it owes its existence to the death of a twenty-six-year-old socialite, or that the hooded marble figure now tucked into an alcove on the museum’s second floor is the expression of his mother’s grief.

Averell, born in 1877, was the product of the unhappy union of Isaac S. Averell, the unambitious heir to a railroad fortune, and Emily Sibley, the daughter of the wealthy founder of the Western Union Company. In 1875, Isaac inscribed Emily’s autograph book: “When looking over these pages in the years to come, will you not sometimes linger kindly over this signature?”¹ They wed a year later but the marriage ended in divorce when their son was six.

Averell attended St. Paul’s, an Episcopal boarding school in Concord, New Hampshire, and graduated from Harvard in 1899. He subsequently decided to pursue a career in architecture and took a three-year course of advanced study at Harvard. In the spring of 1904, after enjoying a European tour, he joined the firm of Herbert D. Hale in Boston. That autumn, he contracted typhoid fever and died without having built a single project. His estate included railroad stock, five horses, and a note for the loan of \$2,500 from his employer.²

By that time, Averell’s mother had remarried and was a fixture in Rochester society. Emily Sibley Watson and her husband James were said to have one of the finest private collections of art in the country. A woman of means in her own right, Mrs. Watson approached President Rush Rhees of the University of Rochester with her intention to build an art museum dedicated to the memory of the son she had lost at such an early age. Crews broke ground on the University Avenue campus in May of 1912, and in early 1913 she commissioned the eminent sculptor William Ordway Partridge to create a memorial statue that would dominate the main gallery.

Partridge had been born in Paris to American parents in 1861. Later he moved to New York City, where he studied at Columbia University. He flirted briefly with a stage career and wrote several books of poetry, but sculpture was his true calling. Among his most famous works are the equestrian sculpture of General U. S. Grant (1895) in Brooklyn’s Grant Square and the heroic *Pieta* (1905) at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York.



William Ordway Partridge,
1861–1930
James G. Averell, 1914
Marble, 22 x 14½ in.
Gift of Mrs. James Sibley
Watson, 13.13
This relief is located on the
base of *Memory*.

(Facing page)

William Ordway Partridge,
1861–1930
Memory, 1914
Marble, 82½ x 26¼ x 29½ in.
Gift of Emily Sibley Watson,
13.12

How Mrs. Watson came to select Partridge for the memorial commission is unclear. It may have been a recommendation from her son’s former employer, Herbert D. Hale, whose own father, the author and clergyman Edward Everett Hale, had been the subject of a Partridge bust in 1891. The contract³ directed Partridge to create a life-size sculpture in fine Carrara marble, as well as a portrait relief of young Averell for its base. He was to be paid

Installation of plaster cast of
Memory, Memorial Art Gallery,
1913
(Left: George Herdle,
first director of MAG)



\$8,000 for his work in four installments of \$2,000; upon the approval of the sketch models; upon the completion of the life-size clay version; when the sculpture was pointed up in marble and half the work on the pedestal was completed; and upon completion of the entire project.

As the date for the opening of the new gallery approached, it became clear that the sculpture would not be ready in time for the dedication ceremonies. Partridge had not been well over the summer, and he was also working on a sculpture of Thomas Jefferson for Columbia University (the model for which is in the Memorial Art Gallery collection) and a memorial for Joseph Pulitzer's gravesite. Unable to get back on schedule, he proposed making a plaster cast from the life-size clay model of *Memory* to stand in until the marble version could be completed. Rochester sculptor Thillman Fabry, later celebrated for his wood and plaster carvings in Kilbourn Hall and St. Paul's Episcopal Church on East Avenue in Rochester, was called upon to create a temporary plaster base.⁴ Thus it was

that on the afternoon of October 8, 1913, when the Memorial Art Gallery opened its doors for the first time, a reproduction of *Memory* stood in the main gallery while the partly finished original remained at Partridge's studio on West Thirty-eighth Street in New York City.

In December of that year, the sculptor requested photographs of the cast in situ to assist him in his work. Correspondence between Partridge and Gallery director George Herdle is incomplete,⁵ but in a letter dated March 11, 1914, Herdle expressed his polite hope that "we will soon have the pleasure of seeing the finished marble in our gallery." The pedestal had become a problem; Partridge explained on March 14 that there had been a bad flaw in the first block they attempted to cut and that a new one had to be started. He expected delivery to take place no later than April 1 and must have been more or less on schedule because on April 23, Herdle informed him that a Rochester craftsman had carved the inscription⁶ on the base. He also assured Partridge that some of the light entering through the skylight had been deadened, resulting in "a vast improvement over the former garish illumination." Four days later, Herdle sent a formal letter of thanks, lauding the sculpture's "tenderness of feeling" and calling it "a source of constant surprise and joy to us all."

Although Partridge pronounced "exorbitant" the Rochester Carting Company's charge of \$90 to set the heavy sculpture in place, he paid the bill and asked to have the plaster cast shipped back to him. Sadly, in August of 1922, an enormous amount of coal was mistakenly dumped into the cellar where the artist had stored about 250 casts, models, and death masks. According to the *New York Times*, "General Grant's head was smashed in....President Roosevelt's body was crushed and his

Memorial Art Gallery façade
(detail), JGA
(initials of James G. Averell)



nose was broken off, and other famous men...were mutilated, while group figures of religious and patriotic scenes were irreparably damaged.”⁷ In all likelihood, the plaster cast of *Memory* was among the victims.

In a book titled *Technique of Sculpture*, Partridge advised artists that “the continuous striking upon the marble dulls the delicate sense of touch and feeling, and stiffens the muscles.”⁸ He suggested that the sculptor do his own finishing work, or supervise it closely, but entrust the initial carving to an assistant, the best of which “has no creative genius of his own.”⁹ In 1889 he had persuaded an Italian carver named Giovanni (John) Rapetti to accept employment in his studio. Rapetti had been one of the sculptors who assisted Frederic Bartholdi in creating the Statue of Liberty and, in all likelihood, it was he who chiseled the basic form of *Memory* after the block of white marble had been pointed up from the clay model. One art historian has written that “most of Partridge’s marble pieces appear dull by comparison with the initial clay models”¹⁰ and suggests that Partridge may not have always done the finishing work himself. In the absence of the model for *Memory*, it is impossible to compare the sculpture against it.



William Ordway Partridge
1861–1930
Thomas Jefferson, ca. 1914
Painted plaster
20 in. high
Gift of Lily Lawlor, 23.8

To twenty-first-century eyes, *Memory*’s flowing drapery and the funeral urn she clutches to her breast create a classical impression. However, Partridge was considered an impressionist sculptor at this stage of his career, and the marks of the chisel that are so apparent in the figure’s robe make it a work very much of its own time. When a dealer from the Metropolitan Art Association in New York City tried to interest the Gallery in acquiring similar work, University of Rochester president Rush Rhees responded: “I doubt whether the Art Committee desires to enter the field of modern sculpture. The memorial piece by William Ordway Partridge is likely to remain an exception for many years to come.”¹¹

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