

SOME LETTERS OF THOMAS WOOLNER  
TO MR. AND MRS. HENRY ADAMS (I)\*

Introduction

Writing in his Education, Henry Adams said: "Of all supposed English tastes, that of art was the most alluring and treacherous. Once drawn into it, one had small chance of escape, for it had no centre or circumference, no beginning, middle, or end, no origin, no object, and no conceivable result as education."<sup>1</sup> As Scheyer points out, this statement was written retrospectively decades later. It was just another contribution to his history of failure, "his personal failure as well as that of his generation in the quest for unity, in the search for the meaning of life and art, and for absolute values. Yet during these English years he followed willingly his mentors Palgrave and Woolner."<sup>2</sup>

Adams described Woolner in this manner: "Another savage critic, also a poet, was Thomas Woolner, a type almost more emphatic than Palgrave in a society which resounded with emphasis. Woolner's sculpture showed none of the rough assertion that Woolner himself showed, when he was not making supernatural effort to be courteous, but his busts were remarkable, and his work was, in Palgrave's clamorous opinion, the best of his day."<sup>3</sup> Woolner took the matter of English art personally, and at times denounced the situation with "anarchistic wrath," sounding much like Carlyle.

Woolner's friendship with Adams continued long after their art dealings, which ended in 1882. The last letter to Adams is dated 1889, but as late as 1891, the year before Woolner's death, Adams visited the sculptor in London.<sup>4</sup>

The Woolner letters give us an excellent insight into artistic tastes on both sides of the Atlantic. For example, Mrs. Adams, upon receiving a Bonington as a gift from Woolner, wrote to her father excitedly on November 24, 1880: "Woolner's Bonington has come -- it is an oil painting about eight by ten inches, and is very delicious, we think. As Bonington ranks with Turner in England, and higher in Paris, I'm rather staggered at so valuable a gift."<sup>5</sup>

A problem arises in the exact identification of the pictures Woolner offered for sale. He frequently refers to them by the artist's

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\*Further letters will appear in subsequent issues.