



HAWTHORNE

Fine Art

CAROLINE DAVIS WILSON (1810-1890)

Caroline Wilson Davis, a talented sculptress recognized for her skill in creating portrait busts and figurative sculptures, was born in New York on July 11, 1810. In the late 1820s, she married Dr. Israel Davis, a Cincinnati physician specializing in herbal medicines, and moved to Ohio. Dr. Davis also bottled and sold “Superior Wine Bitters,” whose bottles are highly sought after by antique bottle collectors today. The couple had four children: Davies (1831-1905), Mary (1833-1927), Genevieve (1838-1865) and Buckingham (1840-1859).

Davis sculpted in clay, plaster and stone from the late 1830s until at least the mid-1860s. Though little is known of her artistic education, it is believed that Davis may have been inspired to begin sculpting after visits to the studio of John Frankenstein (1817-1881), the German painter and sculptor who emigrated to Cincinnati with his family in 1831. The Davises were landlords to the Frankensteins and it seems that the two families developed a close friendship. This relationship with the talented family of artists likely influenced the creative and stylistic direction of Davis’ own work. Cincinnati was a thriving artistic center in the late nineteenth century, and it is likely that Davis was also acquainted with fellow sculptors John L. Whetstone (mid 19th century) and Edward Augustus Brackett (1818-1908), who was similarly self-taught.

In 1841, Davis exhibited two portrait busts at the Cincinnati Academy of Fine Arts, including one of her husband, which was reportedly her first sculpture. At the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge the following year, she exhibited busts of the painter Godfrey N. Frankenstein (1820-1873) and the Reverend Lyman Beecher (1775-1863), a Presbyterian minister, co-founder of the American Temperance Society, and father of famed author Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896).

Davis was also friendly with the celebrated poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). In 1850, while traveling to Mammoth Cave, Kentucky in a large party that included Emerson, Davis reportedly stopped the riverboat, gathered some soft clay, and spontaneously modeled a bust of



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Emerson. A bronze version of this Emerson bust was cast in 1852. On August 12th of that year, Emerson makes reference to a visit from Davis and her son, where the three “walked to Walden & Fair Haven Hill.”¹

After traveling to Italy, Davis’ later work included several religious subjects, many of which were executed in marble in Rome, such as the large *Mary Anointing the Feet of Our Saviour*, which was later presented to the Lane Seminary in Cincinnati. In 1860, she created *Mary of Bethany*, a marble sculpture for which her daughter was the model.

Davis died on September 25, 1890 at the age of 80. She is buried in Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, where her grave is marked by an impressive monument sculpted in the form of a cross-shaped tree trunk adorned with a stone wreath.

Reference:

Mary Sayre Haverstock, Jeannette Mahoney Vance, Brian L. Meggitt, and Jeffrey Weidman, *Artists in Ohio, 1787-1900: A Biographical Dictionary* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), 952.

¹ Henry David Thoreau, Robert Sattelmeyer, and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, Journal: volume 5: 1852-1853* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 294, 521.