Henry Clay

(1777–1852)

The "Great Compromiser," Henry Clay, a native of Virginia, moved to Kentucky at the age of 20 and settled in Lexington. There he practiced law with great success, aided by his sharp wit and nimble mind. In 1806, after a stint in the Kentucky legislature, he was elected to fill the unexpired term of a U.S. senator who had resigned. Clay took the seat, although he was four months younger than the constitutional age requirement of 30. In 1807 he again was elected to the Kentucky legislature, where he eventually served as Speaker. Clay spent most of the years from 1811 to 1825 in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he was elected Speaker his first day in office. Almost immediately Clay made a name for himself as one of the warhawks, the young politicians who fueled anti-British sentiment and helped bring about the War of 1812. In 1814, he served as one of the commissioners negotiating the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the war. During his years in the House, the well-respected Clay was elected Speaker six times.

It was during his time in the U.S. House that Clay urged that the United States become the center of an "American System," joined by all of South America, to wean the country away from dependence on the European economy and politics. He dedicated much of his career to a high protective tariff on imported goods, a strong national bank, and to extensive improvements in the nation's infrastructure.

In 1825, after an unsuccessful campaign for the presidency, Clay was appointed secretary of state under John Quincy Adams. He served in that position until 1829, and was subsequently elected to the U.S. Senate. From 1831 to 1842, and again from 1849 to 1852, Clay distinguished himself as one of the Senate's most effective and influential members.

Clay earned the sobriquet "Great Compromiser" by crafting three major legislative compromises over the course of 30 years. Each time, he pulled the United States from the brink of civil war. In 1820

One of the leading sculptors of the post-Civil War period, Thomas Ball began his artistic career as a painter, but by 1850 he had turned to sculpture. He quickly established a reputation in this new medium with small plaster statuettes and portrait studies. His first work, a cabinet-size portrait bust of Swedish singer Jenny Lind, won such favor that Ball could not produce replicas swiftly enough.

Following a period of study and work in Italy from 1854 to 1857, the artist returned to the United States and soon began a monumental bronze equestrian statue of George Washington for Boston's Public Garden. Also at this time, he executed this statuette of Henry Clay as a companion piece to the small bronze of Daniel Webster (p. 414) he had completed five years earlier. "To me it was not as successful," wrote the artist about his Clay statuette.[1] Ball's opinion is not one generally acknowledged when the two works are compared, however, because his Clay has precisely the animation that his Webster lacks.

A relaxed pose, both alert and poised, shows Clay's tall, lanky body to good effect. Clay seems to turn toward his audience while unrolling the pages of a speech or, more probably, a resolution. The distinctive head is vigorously modeled, with broad mouth, straight nose, wide-spaced eyes, and an expansive brow bracketed by markedly depressed temples. At the opposite end of the body are Clay's remarkably large feet. The attention to accuracy in the feet, as in the head, is characteristic of Ball and is found also in the costume. Yet somehow the detail in the costume is not distracting, as it is in the Webster statuette. Creases and stretches are fitted to a governing rhythm and contribute to the whole effect. Ball clearly profited from his study of Italian sculpture.

The statue is, of course, posthumous: Ball had no more opportunity to take Clay's likeness from life than he had Webster's. His sources were the existing paintings, sculptures, and lithographs of the statesman. For instance, Joel T. Hart, another American sculptor then active in Florence, had completed his life-size, full-length marble statue of Clay in Italy during the 1850s. Hart had become Ball's good friend, and Ball must have been intimately familiar with the statue, which may have been the inspiration for creating his own likeness of Clay.

The abbreviated column beside Clay signifies Fortitude, as it does for Ball's statuette of Webster. (The classical personification of "Fortitude" later acquired the column as an attribute from the biblical account

Henry Clay

Thomas Ball (1819–1911)

Bronze, 1858
30⅞ x 12 x 10¾ inches (including base)
(78.4 x 30.5 x 27.3 cm)
Signed and dated (on lower back of drapery):
T. BALL Sculp. Boston 1858
Inscribed (on back of base): PATENT assigned
to G W Nichols
Gift of The Charles Engelhard Foundation in
honor of Senator Mike Mansfield, 1987
Accepted by the U.S. Senate Commission on
Art, 1987
Cat. no. 24.00007

and 1821, he used his role as Speaker of the House to broker the Missouri Compromise, a series of brilliant resolutions he introduced to defuse the pitched battle as to whether Missouri would be admitted to the Union as a slave state or free state. Although he owned slaves himself, Clay anguished about slavery, which he called a "great evil." He believed slavery would become economically obsolete as a growing population reduced the cost of legitimate labor. Under Clay's compromise, Missouri was admitted as a slave state and Maine as a free state.

In 1833 Clay's skill again was tested when South Carolina passed an ordinance that nullified a federally instituted protective tariff. Although President Andrew Jackson urged Congress to modify the tariff, he threatened to use federal troops against South Carolina if the state refused to collect it. Despite a long-standing enmity toward Jackson and with a deep commitment to high tariffs, Clay ended the crisis by placating both sides. He introduced a resolution that upheld the tariff but promised its repeal in seven years.

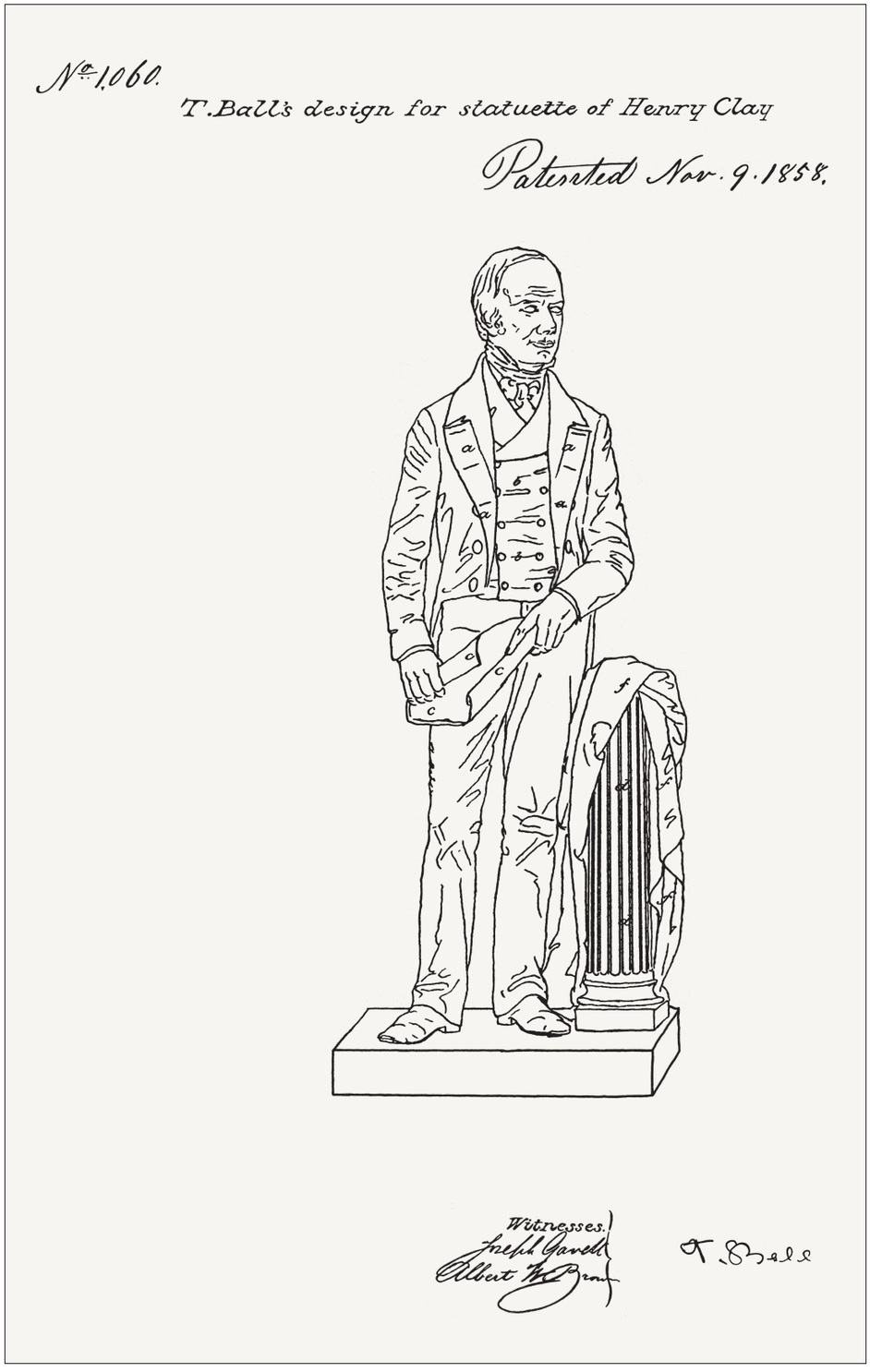
The argument over slavery flared once again in 1850 when Congress considered how to organize the vast territory ceded by Mexico after the Mexican War. As in 1820, Clay saw the issue as maintaining the balance of power in Congress. His personal appeal to Daniel Webster enlisted the support of that great statesman for Clay's series of resolutions, and civil war was again averted.

Clay died in 1852. Despite his brilliant service to the country and three separate campaigns, he never attained his greatest ambition—the presidency. A man of immense political abilities and extraordinary charm, Clay won widespread admiration, even among his adversaries. John C. Calhoun, whom he had bested in the Compromise of 1850, once declared, "I don't like Clay. . . . I wouldn't speak to him, but, by God! I love him."[1]

of Samson sacrificing himself to save the Hebrew people by pulling down the columns supporting the Philistines' temple.) The two or three papers Clay holds may have had a specific reference to a resolution he offered in the House in 1821 as Speaker. Throughout his life, Clay remained famous for his resolution in support of emerging South American colonies "struggling to burst their chains."[2] He is still honored in South America for his passionate support of independence there.

As he had with his statuette of Webster, Thomas Ball claimed and assigned the patent for "a new and useful design for a statuette of Henry Clay" to George W. Nichols of New York City on November 9, 1858. Nichols turned again to the Ames foundry in Chicopee, Massachusetts, for the casting. The pragmatic drawing, prepared by the examiner for the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, is keyed with letters referencing Ball's description in the patent application.

Thomas Ball's career continued to flourish, and he received many lucrative commissions throughout his life. His public monuments include the *Emancipation Group* in Lincoln Park in Washington, D.C., statues of Charles Sumner and Josiah Quincy in Boston, and the sculpture of Daniel Webster for New York's Central Park. Other bronze copies of the Clay statuette are in the collections of the White House, the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, and the Newark Museum in New Jersey.



On November 9, 1858, Thomas Ball assigned this patent for his statuette of Henry Clay to George W. Nichols of New York City.
(Courtesy U.S. Patent and Trademark)

The Senate's bronze bust of Henry Clay was executed by artist Henry Kirke Brown in September 1852, three months after the great statesman's death. The cabinet-size bust came into the possession of Isaac Bassett (p. 28), assistant doorkeeper of the Senate, around that same year. In his unpublished remembrances, Bassett noted that he acquired it through Asbury Dickins, secretary of the Senate, and that it was used by William H. Dougal (with the profile facing left) for the frontispiece of the *Obituary Addresses on the Occasion of the Death of the Hon. Henry Clay*, published by Congress in 1852. It also appears to have been used as a model for a memorial medal of Clay struck about 1855. The bust remained with Bassett's heirs until purchased by the Senate Commission on Art in 1990.

Brown began his art career as a painter, studying with portraitist Chester Harding in Boston. He later became interested in sculpture and traveled to Italy in 1842 to study and work. Less convinced than many of his contemporaries as to the benefits of European classical training for American artists, Brown returned to New York City four years later, where he established a studio and small foundry.

Brown's bust of Clay is obviously a commemorative work, but whether it was commissioned by a patron is not known. More likely, given its reduced size, it was produced on speculation, in the hope that a market for casts of the sculpture would materialize. The bust has received little notice, perhaps because it was soon overshadowed by the equestrian statue of George Washington in Union Square in New York City that followed and is considered Brown's best work.

An earlier version of the bust in the collection of the Newark Museum in New Jersey is dated June 1852 and appears to have been completed around the time of Clay's death on June 29. But Clay had been ill for six months before his death, so the work probably was not modeled from life. Other versions of the Clay bust, also dated 1852 to commemorate Clay's death, are in the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Special Collections of the University of Kentucky. All were cast from molds made from the same clay model.

Because Brown had little opportunity for a life sitting with Clay, the question of his source for the clay model arises. The most noted sculpture of Clay was one by Joel T. Hart (1847), which probably served as the stimulus for Thomas Ball's 1858 posthumous portrait of Clay

Henry Clay

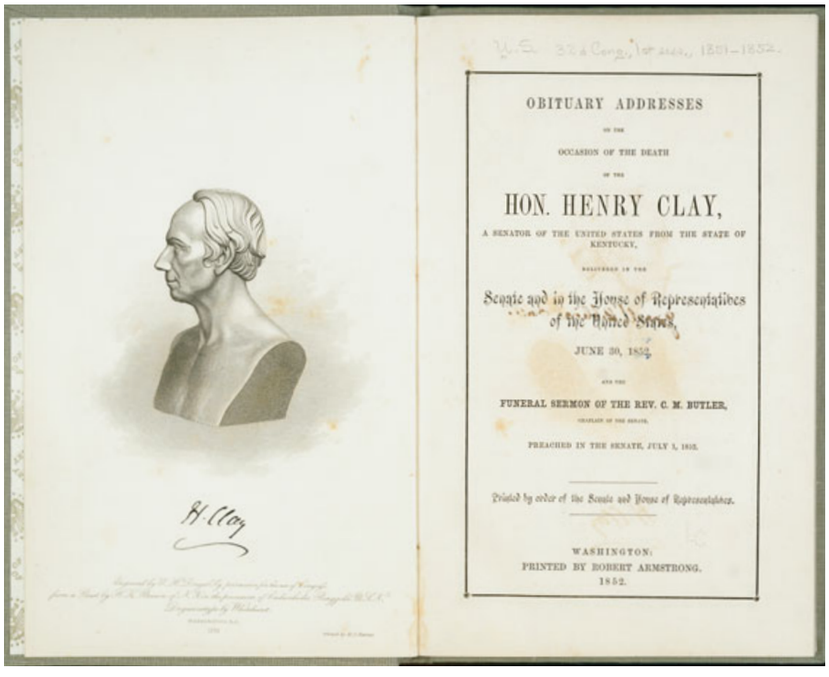
Henry Kirke Brown (1814–1886)

Bronze, 1852
16¼ x 9½ x 6 inches (41.3 x 24.1 x 15.2 cm)
Signed (on back right side): H.K. Brown Sculptor / Sept. 1852
Purchased by the U.S. Senate Commission on Art, 1990
Cat. no. 24.00009

(p. 64). The conception is very similar to Brown's, and it may well have been his starting point, too. But there were also many portrait paintings, prints, and daguerreotypes of the "Great Compromiser" to guide Brown. Clay's contemporaries considered him a difficult subject for artists. The British writer Harriet Martineau observed in 1838 that "no one has succeeded in catching the subtle expression of placid kindness, mingled with astuteness."[1]

Henry Kirke Brown deserves credit for making posterity believe in the visual truth of his Henry Clay. The reduced size of the head results in a concentrated naturalism. Clay's distinctive features—the narrow, high-domed skull; finely structured eye sockets; aquiline nose; high upper lip; wide, thin mouth; and especially the side of the face—are modeled with variety and nuance. The flesh appears malleable, the shifting planes of the face are carefully followed, and the striking network of veins in the forehead and temples carries special conviction.

In terms of post-Civil War sculpture, Brown is a major presence in the nation's capital. In addition to the Clay bust owned by the Senate, he is known for his equestrian statues of Nathanael Greene and Winfield Scott, and portrait statues in the U.S. Capitol's National Statuary Hall Collection of George Clinton of New York, Nathanael Greene of Rhode Island, and Philip Kearney and Richard Stockton of New Jersey.


H. Clay

OBITUARY ADDRESSES

ON THE

OCCASION OF THE DEATH

OF THE

HON. HENRY CLAY,

A SENATOR OF THE UNITED STATES FROM THE STATE OF KENTUCKY,

DELIVERED IN THE

Senate and in the House of Representatives of the United States,

JUNE 30, 1852,

AND THE

FUNERAL SERMON OF THE REV. C. M. BUTLER,

CHAPLAIN OF THE SENATE,

PREACHED IN THE SENATE, JULY 1, 1852.

Printed by order of the Senate and House of Representatives.

WASHINGTON:
PRINTED BY ROBERT ARMSTRONG.
1852.

Henry Kirke Brown's bust of Henry Clay was illustrated on the title page of the 1852 bound obituary addresses for the statesman.
(Library of Congress)

This portrait medallion executed by Charles Cushing Wright around 1855 bears a striking resemblance to the Senate's portrait bust.
(National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution)

In 1955 the Senate decided to honor five of its most significant former members by commissioning their portraits for permanent display in the Reception Room adjacent to the Senate Chamber. The portraits were placed in oval medallions on the walls originally planned for likenesses of "illustrious men" but left vacant when Constantino Brumidi painted the room in the mid-19th century. A committee chaired by Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts was formed to choose the five outstanding members; Henry Clay, Daniel Webster of Massachusetts (p. 418), and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina (p. 54) were easily selected. The committee had difficulty determining the final two subjects, but eventually agreed on Robert M. La Follette, Sr., of Wisconsin (p. 242) and Robert A. Taft, Sr., of Ohio (p. 354), both Republicans.

Following the selection of the five senators, a special Senate commission was charged with choosing American artists to paint the five portraits. The commission was composed of the architect of the Capitol, the director of the National Gallery of Art, and the chairman of the Commission on Fine Arts. In 1953 New York muralist Allyn Cox had been hired to complete the frieze in the Capitol Rotunda left unfinished since the 1880s; now he was chosen to supervise portraits for the Reception Room, assuring visual harmony. Cox would also paint the Henry Clay portrait.

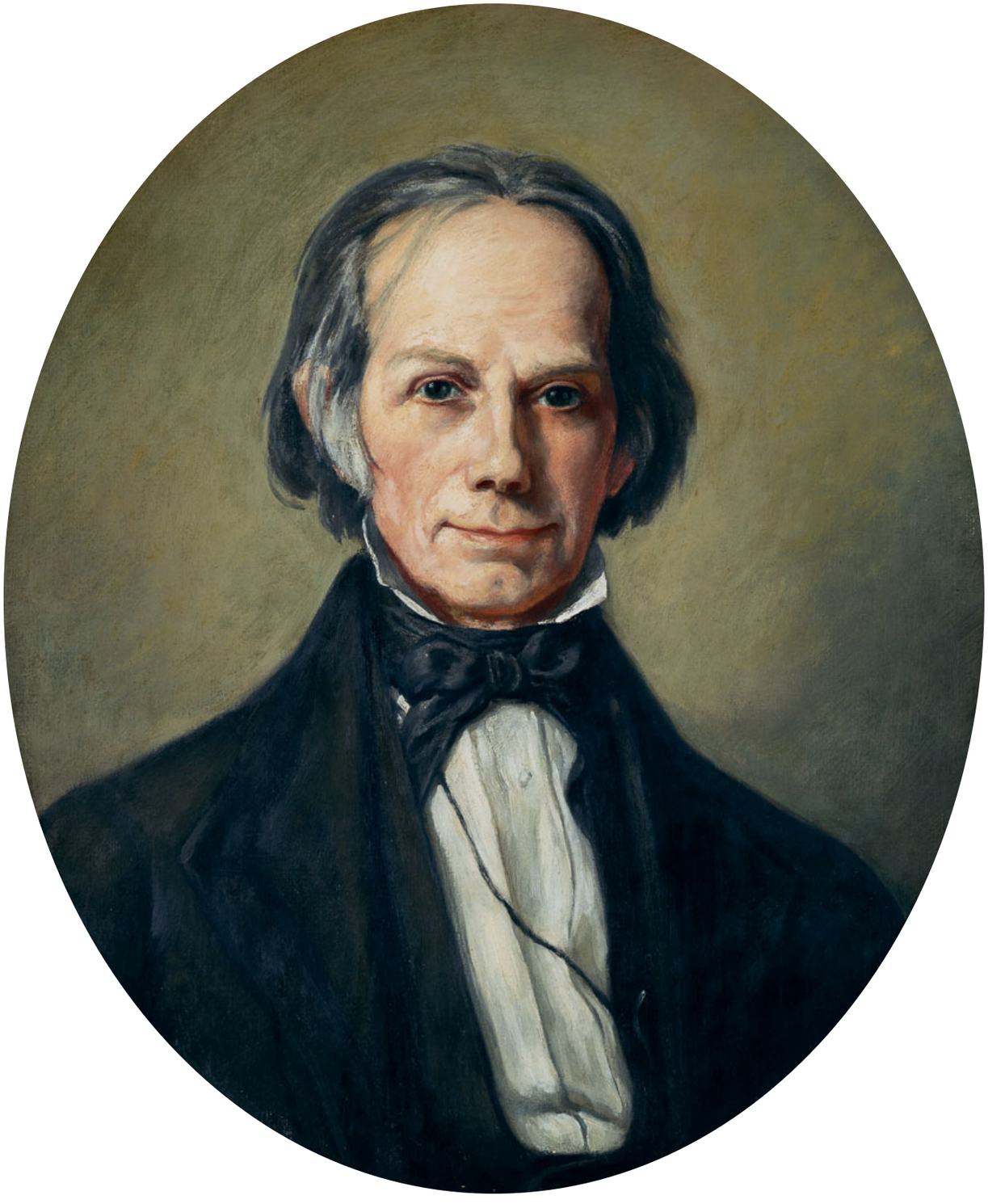
The commission originally intended the portraits to be painted directly onto plaster in the Senate Reception Room. However, Cox persuaded them that the portraits should be executed on canvas, which could then be attached to the wall. The commission also altered its plan to have the portraits painted simultaneously in the Reception Room. Instead, the artists worked on the portraits in their own studios, gathering at the Capitol to put the finishing touches on the paintings after installation.

The commission recommended that Cox base his likeness of Clay on George P.A. Healy's portrait, now owned by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. The Healy portrait was created during a two-month sitting in 1845 at Clay's Kentucky home, Ashland. Healy found that Clay, with his quickly changing moods and expressions, was a challenge to capture on canvas. Clay was delighted with the result, however, stating: "You are a capital portrait painter, Mr. Healy. You are the first to do justice to my mouth, and it is well pleased to express its gratitude."[1]

Henry Clay

Allyn Cox (1896–1982)

Oil on canvas applied to wall, 1958
22⅝ x 19½ inches (oval) (57.5 x 49.5 cm)
Unsigned
Commissioned by the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, 1958
Accepted by the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, 1959
Cat. no. 32.00007



Right:
The portrait of Henry Clay by Allyn Cox is displayed on the south wall of the ornate Senate Reception Room.
(1999 photograph)

Born in New York City in 1896, Allyn Cox apprenticed to his father, the artist Kenyon Cox, working on murals for the Wisconsin State Capitol. He later studied at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League in New York City, and at the American Academy in Rome. In 1952 Cox began an association with the U.S. Capitol that was to last throughout his life. In addition to his work in the Capitol Rotunda and his portrait of Henry Clay, Cox was commissioned to depict the first landing on the Moon for a panel in the Senate's Brumidi Corridors (p. 16), and his many murals of historic scenes and personalities decorate the ceiling and walls of the first floor corridors on the House side of the Capitol. Dubbed "the American Michelangelo," Cox died of a stroke in 1982, just five days after attending a ceremony held in his honor on September 21 in National Statuary Hall at the Capitol.

Senator John F. Kennedy at the unveiling ceremony for the Senate Reception Room portraits, March 12, 1959. Attendees, seated left to right, include Vice President Richard Nixon and Senators Everett M. Dirksen and Lyndon B. Johnson.
(John F. Kennedy Library)


CLAY
WEBSTER

Henry F. Darby, who painted this portrait of Henry Clay, shared a studio with noted painter Samuel Colman in the late 1850s. What little is known of Darby comes from Colman's recollections and Darby's own writings, now in the collection of the Oneida Historical Society in New York. These include correspondence and a journal he wrote at age 65 for his daughter.

Born in North Adams, Massachusetts, Darby was self-taught, except for brief instruction from itinerant painters. According to one account, he was painting in oils by 1842, when he was 13. Evidence of his precocity is found in a fascinating painting, *The Reverend John Atwood and His Family,* in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Here Darby's style is that of a determined New England limner, and the group portrait, fully signed and dated 1845, is a remarkable achievement, compelling in its realism.

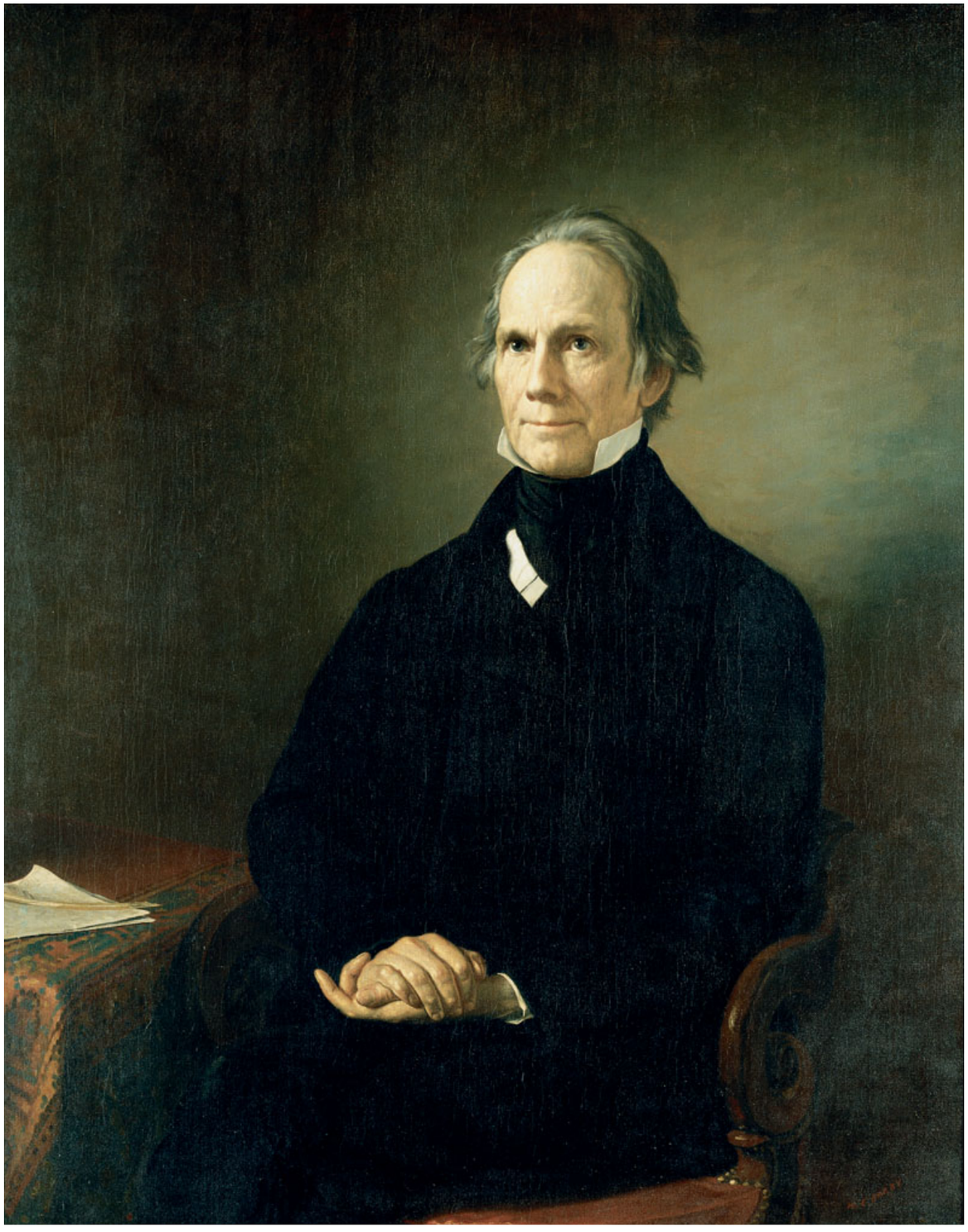
In 1847 Darby became a teacher at the South Carolina Female College in Barhamville. He soon returned north, where he lived in New York City and Brooklyn from 1853 to 1860 and displayed portraits at the annual exhibitions of the National Academy of Design. In 1859–60 he showed paintings of John C. Calhoun and Clay. Darby, who was briefly married, divided his time between Brooklyn, his wife's family home in Brownsville, New York, and Washington, D.C. He was a deeply religious man, and the death of his wife in 1858 impelled him to abandon portrait painting. After placing his young daughter in the care of his wife's family, Darby studied for the ministry, and in 1865 he became deacon of St. John's Episcopal Church in Whitesboro, New York. In 1869 he sailed to England, where he briefly served the Anglican Church. He had returned to America by 1873, when records place him at Saint Saviour's Church in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Later he moved to New York City. Darby continued to paint—mainly religious themes—and he exhibited works as late as 1882 at the Utica Art Association. Few of these later works survive. Age brought failing health, and the artist took up residence with his daughter in Fishkill, New York, where he died in 1897.

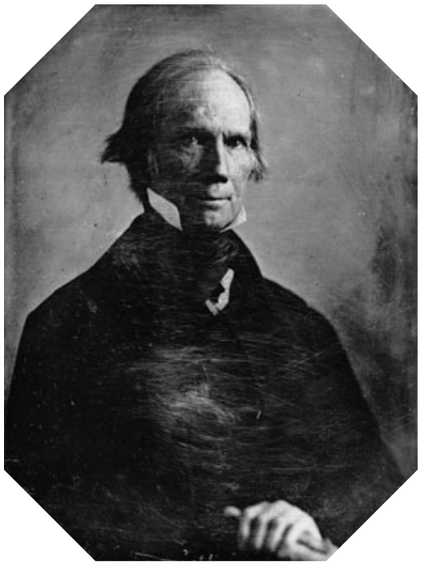
The portrait of Henry Clay is simply conceived: a three-quarter-length figure is seated in a wooden armchair. Darby has placed the chair at a slight angle to the picture plane, next to the corner of a covered table. On the table's surface lie some sheets of paper and a quill pen. Darby has positioned Clay's head to the right of center, and he has

Henry Clay

Henry F. Darby (1829–1897)

Oil on canvas, ca. 1858
49¼ x 39¾ inches (125.1 x 101 cm)
Signed (lower right corner): H. F. DARBY
Purchased by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1881
Cat. no. 32.00002





Mathew Brady's daguerreotype of Henry Clay, ca. 1849, may have been the source for Henry Darby's painted portrait.
(The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Gift of A. Conger Goodyear)

devoted most of his attention to the precise and convincing modeling of it. Brightly lit, the superb face radiates intellect and self-control. The hands are at rest but are expressive and pictorially pleasing. The large canvas tends to dissipate the focus; Clay's suit and the background are monotonous (doubtless they have darkened over time).

The stark presentation of figure against dark ground hints at the pictorial source of the portrait: a daguerreotype of Clay. The painting was apparently created by projecting a collodion plate onto a sensitized canvas, then painting over the image in oil. The effect is precisely that of an enlarged photograph. Mathew Brady, who owned this painting and Darby's portrait of John Calhoun (p. 56), and from whom the Senate acquired both, wrote in 1881 that he had made a photographic portrait of Clay in 1850 and that "Darby made his study at the same time for the oil painting." But several scholars believe instead that a photograph, attributed either to Brady or to the Boston firm of Southworth and Hawes, was Darby's main source. Brady did not say that Darby painted his portrait of Clay in 1850, only "his study." The actual portrait was probably painted nearer to the date of its 1860 exhibition at the National Academy of Design in New York City. Likewise, Darby's portrait of Calhoun (which Brady associated with an 1849 photographic session) is signed and dated 1858, and the Clay may date from the same time.

Darby's portraits of Clay and Calhoun are among the earliest to owe their composition (and, to some extent, their appearance) to assistance from photography. The invention of photography had a notable effect on portrait painting. Initially, at least, it reinforced the descriptive naturalism that was already a common trait of 19th-century portraiture. And for patrons of lesser means, it became a replacement for painted portraits, including miniatures. While some painters feared the competition from photography, many artists agreed with the opinion of painter-photographer-inventor Samuel F.B. Morse, who observed in 1839: "Art is to be wonderfully enriched by this discovery. How narrow and foolish the idea which some express that it will be the ruin of art. . . . Nature, in the results of Daguerre's process, . . . shows that the minutest detail disturbs not the general repose."[1]

Marble busts of vice presidents and portraits of notable senators are displayed in the second floor corridor of the Senate wing. Left to right: Paintings of Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and John C. Calhoun.
(1999 photograph)