

long view of the case, the immediate political tasks of coalition building carried little weight. The women seemed to feel confident that Lee would thrive in Southern memory; what mattered to them was that his image ascend into the realm of culture, that it be wrapped in and refined by the medium of art. They wanted a monument that would ultimately transcend the South, its local politics and tastes. Art was the vehicle. It was art that would secure Lee's position in the national pantheon of great men; art that would enable him to take his rightful place in the universal narrative of human progress, which it was the mission of culture to relate.³⁰

The issue of art was so pivotal for the women's committee that it led to a painful public breach between the women and the governor's association. They refused to accept the results of the governor's 1877 design competition, held on to the money they had promised to the official association, and several years later sponsored a design competition of their own organized along radically different lines. Comparing these two design competitions is a fascinating exercise, for it demonstrates vividly the stakes of representation. Even people who shared the same basic image of Lee could approach the problem of his representation in fundamentally different ways.

The two design competitions were based on opposing methods of viewing and evaluating sculpture. To begin with, the two juries had divergent expectations of what the sculptor's model was supposed to show. The competition sponsored by the women's committee was juried by professional artists who were accustomed to judging competition models as sketches, exercises in composition rather than finished detail. But the governor's jury of 1877 viewed the models not as sketches but as miniature versions of the final design. They showed little interest in the aesthetic values that the sketch was meant to demonstrate—the harmony of lines and forms, the beauty or originality of the controlling idea. This is because the heart of the design problem, as they saw it, was the hero's likeness. "A *man on a horse* will not suffice," French told a potential competitor, "General Lee's effigy alone will satisfy the public."³¹ The board told its judges to attend to "portraiture, skill in workmanship, and true conceptions of the hero and the cause he represented."³² This group of requirements deliberately spoke to the demands of "truth" rather than "art"; and in fact the two categories were often framed as opposing, even irreconcilable, terms. For most of the judges the evaluation of truth boiled down to assessing likeness and pose. The "conception of the cause" had become so grounded in ideas about Lee's physical appearance and demeanor that the representational problem was drastically simplified in this way.³³

This did not mean that creating a faithful likeness and an apt pose was a simple job. So much rested on the notion of Lee as a specimen of physi-

cal and moral perfection that he became an almost impossible standard of representation. He embodied a synthesis of virtues—strength and repose, forcefulness and modesty, manliness and grace—which, it is true, seemed to make him an eminently fit subject for sculpture, inasmuch as standard academic doctrine stressed a similar equipoise of discipline and energy and a similar faith in the equation of physical and moral beauty. But negotiating such a synthesis in practice—particularly in a portrait statue rather than an ideal subject—was a highly problematic task. To complicate it, many of the judges had extremely precise visual memories of Lee and his horsemanship, which gave them extraordinary critical confidence and rigor, even as they apologized for not being judges of “art.” The judges tended to measure the horse and rider, point by point, against a fixed, a priori image of Lee on horseback. Even judges who had not known Lee personally used the same procedure, probably based on their familiarity with prints like *Lee on Traveller* (fig. 5.1) (which the governor’s association had published as a fund-raising device). One such judge explained that he had to “create for myself a standard of what an equestrian statue of General Lee ought to be, and then determine which of the models inspected by me approached nearest to that conception.”³⁴ In this mode of objective comparison, judges studied Lee’s mount in the saddle, the position of his bridle arm, the rigidity of his legs, and diverse points of human and equine anatomy with an eye to detail that very few of the models withstood. One can appreciate the acuteness of this criticism by testing it against the only plaster model still in existence, the entry of Edward Valentine (fig. 5.2). His model received mixed reviews but several negative observations cropped up repeatedly—for example, the defectiveness of the horse’s neck. One judge noted that “from the throat latch to his breast is almost a perpendicular,” which, he argued, suggests a horse in motion, except that this one is supposed to be at rest, four feet on the ground. “The horse,” he concluded, “presents very much the appearance of a Christmas toy,” an image another judge echoed when he wrote disparagingly that the model was “very pretty as an ornament.”³⁵

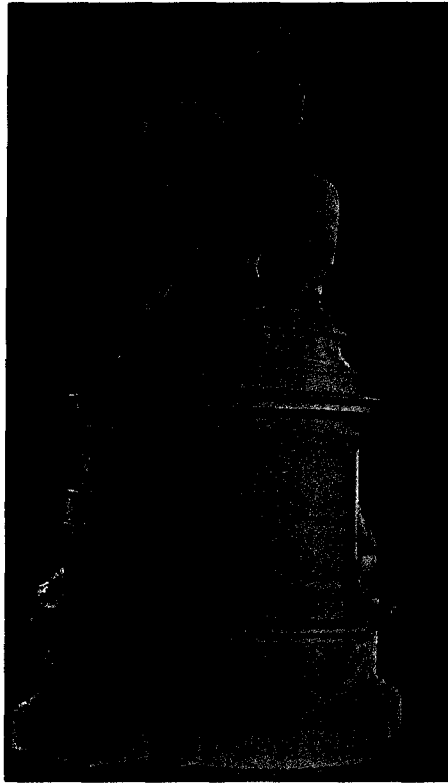
Throughout this criticism there is a notable absence of the kind of narrative reading one might expect from “untrained” critics. If judges did visualize a narrative, it was almost always to show how the sculptor had gone wrong. Thus descriptions like “an old granger going to church on his waggon horse” or “a farmer drowsily wending his way across his broad acres” used narrative terms to satirize particular compositions.³⁶ Almost all the judges favored a still pose, as if Lee and his horse were in front of a camera (which they were in the print of *Lee on Traveller*, made from a photograph). A pose that suggested a more elaborate narrative quickly took the sculptor into dangerous territory. The entry of Moses Ezekiel (fig. 5.3), an expatriate Virginian working in Rome, seemed to be



5.2 Edward Valentine, model for Lee monument, circa 1877, plaster.

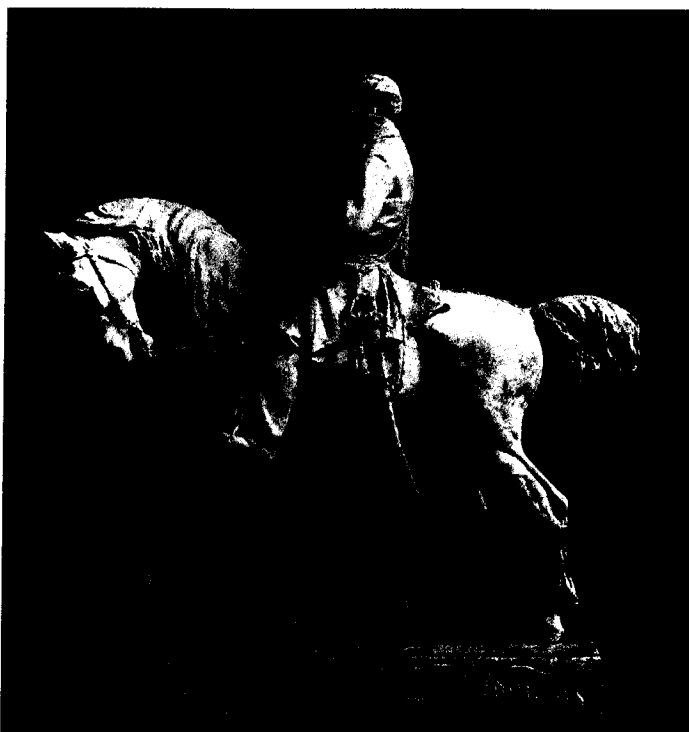
the worst transgressor in this respect; one judge could only make sense of the horse's pose if its rider were in the act of lassoing a wild animal. To represent Lee's mastery as an overt display of restraining force, along the lines of this model, was a fatal error.³⁷ Any narrative but the most minimal seemed to contaminate the canonical relationship between the horse and the rider. In particular, the narrative of domination had to be suppressed, hidden within a more static image of latent power.

It is harder to specify exactly how the judges operated in the women's competition because the documents (if there were any) do not survive. But we can draw some good inferences based on the composition of the jury. The women deliberately chose a small jury of one architect and two sculptors, all Northerners and all respected "professional" monument makers. The architect was federal official Edward Clark, and the sculptors were two famous men we have already encountered for their important role in Union commemoration: John Quincy Adams Ward and Augustus Saint-Gaudens. These three men no doubt ignored the details examined so



5.3 Moses Ezekiel, model for Lee monument, circa 1877, plaster (now lost).

closely in the earlier competition and looked at the models instead as mere sketches, intended, as Saint-Gaudens later said, “to indicate only the general treatment of the proposed work.”³⁸ This way of looking was above all academic, geared toward evaluating how the theme was rendered in the main lines and formal relationships of the composition. One gets a sense of what the judges were looking for by studying Charles Niehaus’s prizewinning model, which survives in a studio photograph dated August 11, 1885 (fig. 5.4). Unlike *Lee on Traveller*, posed still before a camera, horse and rider here are in movement. The design features a strong leading diagonal connecting the angle of the horse’s lowered head with the right front leg planted beneath. Contrasting with this powerful leaning pull of the horse is the fixed upright position of the rider, as stable as a carousel pole. In narrative terms, Lee maintains perfect balance as he restrains the animal’s bursting internal energy. In compositional terms, Lee’s vertical body anchors the group in place while the horse’s forward-pointing diagonal breaks the design’s symmetry and



5.4 Charles Niehaus, model for Lee monument, circa 1886, plaster (now lost).

puts the whole in motion. Niehaus, it seems, negotiated a proper balance between compositional values of dynamism and stability, and between representational values of force and sobriety. The judges overlooked a detail of Niehaus's model that drew intense criticism from Virginians monitoring the competition results: the bobtail on Lee's horse. This was a representational gaffe that would have disqualified Niehaus from serious consideration in the men's competition. The bobtail simply did not belong on a Virginia gentleman's horse. It carried suggestions of effeminacy, as the *Richmond Whig* implied when it said that Lee might as well have had "his hair banged."³⁹ Jubal Early went so far as to write the governor and tell him that if the design were ever erected he would "feel like collecting the survivors of the 2nd Corps, and going to Richmond to blow up the thing with dynamite."⁴⁰

There were bitter differences, then, between the two approaches to sculpture represented in these design competitions. They had become po-

larized around what were seen as two conflicting values: artistry and objectivity. For the most part the Virginia press came down on the side of objectivity, and kept arguing that all the public really wanted was "Lee as he actually was," not a figure smothered by the "tricks" and "adulteries" of art.⁴¹ The *Norfolk Landmark* argued that the sponsors of the monument should listen to the veterans, and that the veterans "call with one voice for the subordination of Art to Nature."⁴² This was a familiar sort of dispute, repeated many times in the history of nineteenth-century American public sculpture. Without a set of academic institutions to establish standards of production and channel patronage, as in France, American sculptural practice in the mid-nineteenth century still had two extreme flanks—one intent on professionalizing sculpture by mastering the Western European tradition, and the other intent on marketing an image of "natural" American genius in tune with popular taste. Harriet Hosmer and Clark Mills, as we have seen, were representative of these opposing flanks in the 1860s, but the rhetorical dispute between "art" on the one side and "nature" and "the people" on the other would continue for decades to mark discussions of public art, especially military monuments.

The governor and his board aligned themselves with the popular flank and effectively rigged their competition against European artists.⁴³ Not surprisingly, the jury ended up supporting a popular sculptor in the self-taught mold. The surprise was that their choice was neither a man nor a Southerner. She was Vinnie Ream, the former protégé of Clark Mills, most famous for her likeness of Lincoln in the federal Capitol. Ream was an extremely complex figure who grew up in the West, in and out of the border states, and who managed to use this experience to play an ambiguous political role herself, moving successfully between radical Republicans and ex-Confederates.⁴⁴ She won the 1877 competition by producing an exacting likeness of Lee (the model does not survive) and by mobilizing a network of Southern congressmen to lobby on her behalf.⁴⁵

The results of the competition, however, were never made public because the women's committee refused to accept them. Ream's gender was not enough to satisfy the women and may in fact have hurt her standing with them. Her lobbying practices had given her a notorious reputation, created largely by female critics in the Northern press. She also represented the very sort of popular sculptural practice the women's committee was trying to transcend; in their published letter refusing to sanction the competition, Sarah Randolph declared that "we have only one aim in view, which is to secure that which, being the noblest and most beautiful, will be the most appropriate."⁴⁶ Governor Kemper's failure to rally the women's committee behind his jury's choice effectively put an end to his

association's fund-raising hopes and left an opening for the women to advance their own competition, organized specifically to encourage European entries.

Ironically, though, the winner of this competition—Charles Niehaus—was not a European artist but a young, unknown German American sculptor from Ohio. The entrant with the greatest international standing, French sculptor Antonin Mercié, did not even receive honorable mention.⁴⁷ If Ezekiel's model was the standard of folly in the first competition, Mercié's performed the same role in the second. Written descriptions of the model indicate that Lee was depicted on a rearing horse, riding over "the shrieking and prostrate victims of a battle-field"—though Mercié later explained that the dying soldiers were meant to be Lee's own men, "stretching for a last affectionate glance of their leader."⁴⁸ This Napoleonic conception managed to violate the Lee cult's proscription on narrative display, the professional judges' notion of sculptural decorum, and the ladies' sense of gentility. Saint-Gaudens himself is said to have condemned the model as "an utter misconception of General Lee's character."⁴⁹ The common reaction to Mercié's entry from both the artist-judges and the popular press shows that there was some common ground between them, however polarized their positions. Both the professional and the popular schools of criticism condemned energetic narrative treatments because they threatened to confuse or even cancel the image of benign leadership the monument was supposed to project.

Nevertheless, the commission for the Lee Monument eventually went to this same Mercié, even though he had so completely botched the job in his competition entry. The prizewinner Niehaus was an untried sculptor, Mercié a known quantity. In fact, Saint-Gaudens knew him personally. Both had trained at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and Mercié was a model of the sort of academic professionalism Saint-Gaudens believed American sculpture needed.⁵⁰ For reasons that will never be clear—perhaps stemming from the amazing bobtail controversy—Niehaus's prizewinning design was rejected, and Saint-Gaudens persuaded the women's committee to give Mercié another chance by submitting a revised model. By this time, in the spring of 1886, the ladies' committee was finally in the process of officially merging with the governor's association, now headed by Governor Fitzhugh Lee, nephew of the hero himself. It appears that the women cut a deal with the governor: he could pick the site for the monument if they could choose the artist. Working together, they instructed Mercié to send a second model, and to represent the horse with all four feet on the ground. This simple instruction was enough to bring Mercié's new composition approximately into line with the prevailing image of Lee; that and a good deal of application to the fine points of likeness and costume (closely monitored by Governor Lee) finally led to



5.5 Antonin Mercié and Paul Pujol, Lee Monument, 1890, Monument Avenue, Richmond.

a contract with the artist.⁵¹ Mercié's final design appropriately emphasized sobriety and stability (fig. 5.5). He showed Lee exerting only the slightest pressure on the reins; he spread the legs of the horse to the edges of the supporting plinth, and spread the legs of the rider to echo the slope of the pedestal (which was designed by Beaux-Arts-trained architect Paul Pujol). Seen from any side, therefore, the outlines of the monument form a graceful but stable pyramid, the equestrian group extending and fulfilling the directional flow of the pedestal.

Four feet on the ground and a good likeness: after all the controversy it turned out to be fairly straightforward to reconcile the demands of "truth" and the demands of "art," to satisfy both popular and professional tastes. After a concerted effort in the Virginia press to overturn the selection of Mercié, the artist's revised design calmed the fears of veterans and others with a stake in the Lee cult. "The soldiers will know him," trumpeted one Richmond headline; the article went on to relate how one Confederate veteran who saw the statue in the foundry "experienced all his old-time emotions, and his heart told him, 'That's Marse Robert!'"⁵²

Still, Mercié had had to lobby hard for even the most minor departure from the canonical image of Lee on Traveller. The sculptor insisted, for example, on representing Lee bareheaded and with one side of his collar upturned to break the hard lines of the uniform. As long as he could argue that these innovations enhanced Lee's natural physical beauty, he remained on safe ground.⁵³ The ladies for their part succeeded in obtaining a work of impeccable craftsmanship elevated and transfigured by its elegant pedestal, as if the aesthetic values that were deliberately submerged in the hero's likeness could flourish in the nonrepresentational base, with its sensuous play of convex and concave surfaces. Here was an artistic achievement that could draw the admiration of someone like Henry James, who compared the monument to "some precious pearl of ocean washed up on a rude bare strand."⁵⁴

James was here referring to the monument's barren site on the outskirts of the city, surely the most bizarre location ever chosen for a Beaux-Arts-designed monument. In a bold move Governor Lee had decided not to build the monument on the grounds of the State Capitol, where the original governor's association had planned to build and where every major public sculpture in the city had previously gone. Instead he chose to locate the monument in a plot of empty farmland owned by a local capitalist, who planned to transform the property into an elegant residential subdivision; the Lee Monument in this plan was to be the crowning feature of a new boulevard named Monument Avenue, which would serve as the suburban frontier of the city's western expansion. In the internal debate over the monument's site, Sarah Randolph of the ladies' committee had urged a serene park setting on the grounds of its "eternal fitness"; in other words she wanted the monument's surroundings to remain fixed in unchanging "nature," not in city neighborhoods that tended to rise and fall in economic cycles.⁵⁵ Certainly she did not want her project associated with a real estate venture that speculated blatantly on the prestige value of Lee and his monument.

But that is exactly what the governor's scheme was, "a plain business proposition" in his own words, and it soon paid off handsomely.⁵⁶ After a couple of decades in which the city formally annexed the property and actively promoted its development, Monument Avenue filled in and became the most fashionable address in town. The avenue became home to the city's elite—the "New South" elite of merchants, lawyers, and other professionals who had subsumed and displaced the old planter class. At the same time the avenue also became home to a whole series of major public monuments to Confederate leaders, which were placed on axis with the original monument to Lee; monuments to Jefferson Davis and J.E.B. Stuart erected in 1907 cemented the boulevard's new reputation. The decision to shift the Lee site away from the state Capitol and into the



5.6 Photograph of Monument Avenue, circa 1907, in Richmond Chamber of Commerce, *Richmond, Virginia, 1907*, n.p.

city's suburbs—ironically, made by a state governor—thus sparked a critical change in the monumental layout of the city. From now on the most important Confederate figures were memorialized in an entirely separate zone, a city-sponsored precinct fully integrated into the modern civic fabric and clearly intended to showcase civic progress. The development of this new Confederate boulevard in the interest of progress even swept away the remnants of earthworks left from the Confederate defense of Richmond, which had been preserved as important markers of the past.⁵⁷ Early promotional photographs of the avenue highlight this full-fledged embrace of modernity. In one image published in 1907 (fig. 5.6), the equestrian of Lee appears on the horizon, just off center, circumscribed within a linear network of residential amenities that are the real focus of the composition: the trees freshly planted in the grassy median and the adjoining strips of asphalt converge in perfect orthogonals on the distant monument; the telephone pole anchored in the foreground, dead center, towers beside the monument and holds a wire that skims just above the statue's head—all this framed in a filigreed oval. Such imagery made Lee's universe—and the institution of slavery which had been central to it—an ever more distant memory.

Unexpectedly, then, the once unpromising location of the Lee Monument turned out to have great symbolic value. It further cemented the depoliticization of Lee by moving him away from the old precinct of the Confederate Capitol and quite literally into the city of the future—a residential neighborhood not yet even built. Once the boulevard began to

fill in around the monument, it effectively asserted the continuity between old and new regimes, between the Confederate past and a modern South now oriented to the mainstream national values of business and progress. "We are all hunting for dollars," wrote the *New York Herald* at the monument's dedication, summing up its lesson of national reconciliation in strikingly unsentimental terms. The statement, reprinted approvingly in the Richmond papers, was corroborated by their various reports on the healthy prices commanded by the subdivided lots surrounding the monument.⁵⁸

The monument in its suburban site thus managed to heal a number of divisions that had opened up in the course of the monument campaign. These were divisions between truth and art, between business and gentility, indeed between male and female elites. The gendering of the dispute had been particularly embarrassing to the white leadership, and the successful merger of the men's and women's efforts provided the symbolic closure necessary to complete the ritual of commemoration. The combination of masculine and feminine principles proved irresistible, both working in the service of a politics of white supremacy. The ladies' committee contributed a normative notion of culture in which art and virtue supposedly coincided. The governor contributed a "plain business proposition" with its vision of civic progress and private profit. Circumscribing and embellishing the equestrian likeness of Lee, these principles of culture and capitalist progress served to refine the statue's already subtle narrative of power. Just as the rider's brute mastery of the animal was disguised as a narrative of self-mastery—a relation of power transformed into a revelation of self—so the brute fact of white domination embodied in slavery was disguised as a lesson in the white man's own capacity for valor and achievement. Occasionally the disguise might be stripped off. After the cornerstone-laying ceremony in 1887, the *Richmond Dispatch* argued that the example of Lee vindicated the Old South and its slaveholding class: "Was there ever on this planet a nobler class of men?" The editorial went on to resurrect some of the standard planks of the proslavery argument familiar from antebellum times.⁵⁹ But by the time the monument was completed, the ritual steered clear of such overt defenses; ceremony and commentary were orchestrated to support the monument's assertion of mainstream values. The monument in its final incarnation thus clothed white power in an image of civilization—a civilization that presupposed whiteness as a kind of moral prerequisite.

"A people carves its own image in the monuments of its great men." Thus began Archer Anderson's oration at the dedication of the monument in May 1890.⁶⁰ The dedication ceremony was a huge ritual affair designed to construct an image of this collective, this "people," who had supposedly erected the monument. The ceremony deliberately rallied