

HENRY CLAY (1771-1852), c. 1830

Anonymous

marble relief

6 1/4 (h) (15.88)

Donor unknown

Weis 34

Hewes Number: 30

As a young man, Henry Clay studied law and in 1797 was an attorney in Lexington, Kentucky. He was known for his excellent debating skill and a keen legal mind. Entering the national political arena in 1806 at the age of thirty-five, he was first elected a United States Senator from Kentucky and for the next twenty years served in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, earning a reputation as an orator that has secured his place in history. In 1820, when elected to the American Antiquarian Society, Clay was at work on the Missouri Compromise, defending the right of individual states to determine whether slavery should be permitted within their borders. In 1824 Clay ran unsuccessfully for president.¹

At the time of his election to the Society, Clay wrote, 'Taking great interest in the highly useful labours of that institution, I have great pleasure in acknowledging the obligation which they have put me under by this unexpected and unsolicited mark of their respect.'² Clay, who spent most of his time in Washington and Kentucky, was not an active member of the American Antiquarian Society but he did visit it in 1833 and met the institution's young librarian, Christopher Columbus Baldwin (cats. 2-3).³

Remembered by his contemporaries for his aptitude as a politician and diplomat and his skill as a speaker, Clay was often memorialized during his lifetime by sculptors and portrait painters. This small marble relief bears some resemblance to the work of the Kentucky sculptor Joel Hart (1810-77), who often depicted Clay in marble and plaster. However, nothing definite is known about the identity of the artist who created this relief or how and when it became part of the collection of the American Antiquarian Society.⁴

¹ For more on Clay, see Robert U. Remini, Henry Clay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

² Henry Clay to Rejoice Newton, March 4, 1821, AAS Archives.

³ Christopher Columbus Baldwin Diary, November 5, 1833, Christopher Columbus Baldwin Papers, 1817-1835, AAS Manuscript Collection. Baldwin wrote: 'I was visited by Mr. Clay at the Antiquarian Hall this morning, in

company with the committee. He requested me, upon his arrival in Washington, to write him giving him an account of the Antiquarian Society.' No such correspondence between the two men has been located.

⁴ Nathaniel Paine, 'Portraits and Busts in Possession of the American Antiquarian Society and of Other Associations in Worcester, Mass.,' The New England Historical and Genealogical Register 30 (January 1876): 24. This small marble relief is not recorded in any of the early inventories of the Society, although Paine does list a plaster bust of Clay after Shobal Vail Clevenger (1812-43) that is no longer owned by the Society.