

LORADO TAFT: THE CHICAGO YEARS

Background to publication of the Allen Weller biography

Remarks to The Chicago Literary Club

April 7, 2014

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It is impossible to have attended the University of Illinois in Champaign, to have lived in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago for more than 35 years and to have grown up in central Illinois without having an awareness of the work of LORADO TAFT. TAFT was one of America's leading sculptors from the mid-1890s until his death in Chicago in 1936. Taft's work is on view throughout this state, including major works in Champaign , at the Art Institute of Chicago, in Hyde Park, and in places as distant as Washington, D.C. and Seattle, Washington. His life in Chicago is the subject of a book being published by the University of Illinois

Press - a biography many years overdue and with a long gestation period - about which you will hear this evening.

Shortly after I joined this Chicago Literary Club in the year 2000, I became aware of the fact that Taft had been a member of the Club throughout the 1890s and had delivered five papers. I sought without success to locate copies of Taft's presentations to this Club. I did learn that the University of Illinois library in Champaign contained the Taft archives, and I resolved "some day" to examine these to see whether I might find copies of Taft's presentations to The Chicago Literary Club. Digging into these archives several years later I found evidence of only one: *Paris from a Mansard: Experiences of an American Art Student*, delivered to the Club on January 20, 1890.

In November, 2009, having pursued the Taft researches as far as I was then able, I presented to the Club a biographical profile of Taft. At that time I alluded to an unpublished manuscript biography of Taft by the late Allen Weller of the University of

Illinois which had come to my attention while examining the Taft archives. Weller was Dean of the College of Fine and Applied Arts at Illinois from 1954-1971. In 1985 the University of Illinois Press published Weller's *Lorado In Paris*, covering Taft's life from his birth in 1860 through 1885, and ending with Taft's years as a student at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. Weller thereafter started work on a Taft biography covering the balance of his life, to be titled *The Chicago Years*. This manuscript was not quite complete at the time of Weller's death in 1997, and my initial inquiries as to its publication status at the University of Illinois Press and elsewhere elicited responses which to me seemed both indifferent and less than forthcoming.

However, I soon also learned of a number of people who felt this a worthwhile project which deserved completion, particularly - Allen Weller's daughter; people in Elmwood, Illinois (Taft's birthplace) who maintain a Taft Museum; people in Oregon, Illinois (where Taft's summer art camp flourished into the 1920s,

and where his monumental Blackhawk statue [illus. *Blackhawk*] overlooks the Rock River); and other scattered Taft scholars and devotees.

The status of this stalled biography was raised by me at a Chicago meeting of the College Art Association in February, 2010 where a where a Taft seminar was part of the program. Several papers devoted to various aspects of Taft's legacy were presented. Shortly thereafter I offered to collaborate on getting the Weller manuscript ready for publication and was handed the entire manuscript copy of Weller's entire work as far as it had proceeded prior to his death. I dug into the text using essentially only my lawyer skills of careful review, checking names, dates, spellings, place names, and fixing the inevitable blips and malaprops which creep into all manuscripts.

I took no liberties with Weller's analysis or decisions as to what parts of Taft's life and work to discuss. Thus I cleaned up the manuscript as far as I was able over a period of several months.

Some of this work was done in my Chicago office with its powerful computer and Internet resources. An even greater part was done on excursions beside campfires throughout the Midwest in my RV carrying my personal Taft library of about twelve volumes and my trusty Blackberry, often with sporadic Internet service.

During this period the interest in this project of the University of Illinois Press was revived, but my requests for editorial guidance were met with the admonition to follow exactly the mandates of the extensive style manual of the Press and to bring the work to them only when it was complete and ready for publication, including with no more than about 50 or fewer black and white illustrations with copyright clearances attached. I'm pretty skilled at managing and organizing words, but I was baffled as to how to proceed with illustrations and clearances. The Press' *Style Manual* is itself a forbidding document. Moreover, some of the later chapters, written as Allen Weller's health was failing, clearly needed substantive

revision as to content and emphasis. Who was I to take a sculptor's chisel to Weller's work?

Enter a one-man rescue squad: my colleague, Robert G. La France of the Krannert Museum at the University of Illinois in Champaign where he is Curator of Pre-Modern Art, meaning everything from the close of the last glacial period to about 1900. Bob wrote me and suggested that we work on this project together, as he also had an interest in Taft and had responsibilities at the Museum for important works of Taft, including the large piece in its entry foyer *The Blind*. What a relief, to have someone involved who actually knew what they were doing in terms of Taft's aesthetic development, and whose workplace at the Krannert Museum was only a few steps from the offices of the University Press. So we have now progressed to the point that the final edited text and all the illustrations (more than 200) are in the hands of the Press. You might imagine that the only remaining task is for someone to push a button and ready the loading dock for shipment of the completed

work. Not really. Once the authors are finished on a work of this kind, the University Press brings its own proofreaders, editors, indexers, layout personnel and the like onto the scene before any press buttons are touched. We have now signed off on the page proofs covering more than 300 pages and it is essentially out of our hands. It will be a very handsome volume, something both Taft and Weller would, I believe, be proud of.

My interest in Taft has always been grounded in the proximities I noted above and in further similarities in our lives which have led to a sense of kinship which is quite deep. We both grew up in downstate Illinois, went to college at the University of Illinois and then left Illinois for extended periods (Taft for art studies in Paris – me for law school in the east and the Peace Corps in Africa) before settling permanently in Chicago. We both lost our first wives to tragic illness fairly early on. We both remarried and had daughters, no sons. We both had one or more sisters with whom we were and are close. Taft was furious when one of his best

friends, the writer Hamlin Garland, married his sister Zulime in 1899. We both spent most of our adult years living in Hyde Park near the University of Chicago with which we both have strong associations. My artistic emphasis has been in the classical jazz forms of the mid-20th century; Taft never lost his devotion to the *Beaux-Arts* tradition. *Avant-garde*, cutting-edge we are not. That's quite a lot to have in common.

I want to close my part of this presentation by reminding everyone that Taft's life and career were multi-dimensional in ways that are rare in the world of working artists:

1. He was a teacher, conducting classes in sculpture for more than 20 years at the Art Institute of Chicago, and after 1906 for 30 years at the Midway Studios which he established at the University of Chicago in Hyde Park. Many young women took up sculpture under his direction as is evident in the photos from his classes and studios.

2. He was a scholar and writer composing magazine and newspaper pieces, pamphlets and brochures on art history and the exhibitions of his day from his student days in Paris throughout his career. He also wrote in 1903 and thereafter edited the book which became the standard reference text in its field: *The History of American Sculpture*.

3. He was a gifted public lecturer. Taft loved to talk – he could communicate well with any audience and did so frequently throughout his life, some times being paid some times not. His message was clear – look to the beauty of the creations of the great artists of the past and let them inspire artists and motivate the public to support the beautification of the new American landscape. He is properly called an ‘art evangelist’ and ‘art missionary’ for these reasons. Last week, as I walked down Dearborn Street headed south, I observed our current principal installations along the way, the Dubuffet, Picasso and Miro works around the Daley Plaza, the Chagall off Dearborn and Monroe, and the orange Calder flamingo

in the Federal Plaza. Would Taft have approved of these works? I don't think so. Particularly not when his own Fountain of the Great Lakes is now misplaced and in a state of considerable decay outside the Art Institute.

4. He was a generous but often frustrated philanthropist. Most of his efforts to make the Midway Plaisance landscape a showcase for outstanding sculpture came to naught; his Dream Museum concept which he hoped could be placed in what is now the Museum of Science and Industry was overtaken by Julius Rosenwald and the millions he was willing to invest there for another purpose. Still, Taft never turned away from his willingness to lend a hand, provide a word of encouragement or contribute something of value to any public enterprise which could lead to the beautification of our communities.

I can think of no other American artist who has exhibited all of these multi-dimensional qualities: artist, teacher, scholar,

advocate, philanthropist -- to the extent that Taft did throughout his life.

I want you to hear now from a man who is a true art historian and scholar, and who has been tireless in bringing this project to fruition. Until I saw the page proofs, read all the expanded footnotes, and then observed the large collection of photographs gathered from many archival and other sources to be included in the completed volume, I was unaware of the prodigious amount of work Bob LaFrance has devoted to this project. The Taft and Weller archives at the University of Illinois are extensive and valuable, but cluttered and more superficially than actually organized along thematic or chronological lines. Bob found his way through this morass in ways which would be evident only if you knew what he had at hand. Somehow he got the powers of the University of Illinois Press, the Krannert Museum, and other interested parties to commit to a final product of which we can all be proud. Here he is to tell you more about it.