The Statue of the Christus Consolator at The Johns Hopkins Hospital: Its Acquisition and Historic Origins

NANCY MCCALL

The Alan Mason Chesney Medical Archives, The Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, Baltimore, Maryland

One of the great landmarks of The Johns Hopkins Hospital that has evoked the most comment over the years is the colossal statue of Christ that stands in the rotunda of the Hospital’s Administration Building. While its appropriateness at a nonsectarian hospital remains a continuing source of debate, many questions are perennially raised as to why the statue was acquired in the first place. This paper has, therefore, been undertaken in an attempt not only to document the statue’s acquisition, but also to explore the particular reasons for its selection. Beginning with the occasion of the statue’s presentation, there are numerous descriptions of this historic event. From official minutes to newspaper accounts, a full picture can be had of the ceremonies that marked the unveiling of the statue. Through piecing together a variety of documentary sources, it is also possible to obtain an idea of the circumstances that led to the statue’s acquisition.

In a program replete with oratory, sacred music and prayer, the statue was unveiled on October 14, 1896. The officiating ceremonies began at three p.m. with an invocation by the Reverend Jere Witherspoon, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, who set the tone of the event by conjuring up images of Christ as healer and minister to the sick. Following the opening prayer, the elderly and distinguished donor, Mr. William Wallace Spence, sought to explain why he had chosen to give a statue of Christus Consolator to The Johns Hopkins Hospital. He remarked that while visiting the Frue Kirke in Copenhagen he had been so greatly impressed with the statue of Christus Consolator by Danish sculptor Bertel Thorwaldsen that “the thought came into my heart how eminently appropriate it would be to have this ideal statue placed where it now stands, in the center of this hall, under the lofty dome of this great hospital. To every weary sufferer entering these doors, the first object presented to him is this benign, gracious figure, looking down upon him with pitying eyes and outstretched arms...” (1). Then in the presence of the officers and trustees of the Hospital, Mayor Hooper and members of City Council, and approximately seven hundred guests, four-year-old Emily Riggs, great-granddaughter of Mr. Spence, performed the official act of undraping the 10½-foot-tall muslin-clad statue. The Minutes of the Hospital Trustees record that “as the loosened drapery fell and the divine figure stood revealed, the effect upon the audience of this presence was so impressive that they were awed into silent admiration, rather than moved to applause” (2).

By all accounts the program for the unveiling was a ponderously somber occasion. However, one slight note of levity is recorded in the press. The Sun reports that little Emily brought a touch of disquiet to the events with gleeful bursts of “childish treble” (3). Having special prominence as the great-granddaughter of the donor, Mr. Spence, Emily’s breach of comportment seems to have been gently tolerated by the guests. The journalist writing for the Sun seized upon the contrasts created by little Emily’s presence to add a bit of dash and sentimentality to his story. He used the child’s smallness as a scale in measuring the statue’s great size and her lively lapse of inhibition as a device to emphasize the decorum and formality of the occasion: “The loosening of the coverings which concealed the gift from the gaze of the throng seated around it was done by a string pulled by the baby hand of a great-granddaughter of the donor, little Emily Riggs...” (3).

Mr. W. T. Dixon, President of the Board of Trustees, delivered an acceptance speech in which he expressed the gratitude of the Trustees and commented upon the statue’s fitting location, “You have most appropriately placed this ‘Divine Healer’ just where it can be seen by all who may enter the doors of the Hospital, thus affording them the opportunity to derive comfort, courage and hope from its contemplation. And not only are the outstretched hands of this Christus Consolator held out to this company, this community and the people of this age, but they will remain extended to tens of thousands of the generations yet to come” (1). Mr. Dixon’s speech was followed by Whittier’s hymn entitled “The Healer,” which was sung by a male quartet. Again the theme of Christ as Divine Healer was stressed. The last stanza seemed especially applicable to the statue of Christus Consolator in a hospital setting:

That Good Physician liveth yet
Thy friend and guide to be;
The Healer by Gennesaret
Shall walk the rounds with thee. (1)
Fig 1. The Christus Consolator of The Johns Hopkins Hospital
President Gilman, at the invitation of the Hospital Trustees, delivered the oration. He spoke of the life and work of the sculptor Thorwaldsen, the fine caliber of the copy of the Christus Consolator that had been obtained for the Hospital, and the symbolic impact of the Christus Consolator in nineteenth-century art. He emphasized the universal and timeless appeal of the Thorwaldsen Christus:

We are assembled in the presence of one of the best works of modern Christian sculpture,—a transcendent theme, treated by an illustrious artist, in his noblest manner; a work, too, that has stood the test of more than seventy-five years without a word of censorious criticism. Canova saw it in Rome, while it was modeling by the artist and praised it. The people of Copenhagen determined to have it. It was reproduced at Potsdam (Berlin) in front of the Church of Peace, near which the Emperor Frederic lies buried. A copy, in plaster, surrounded by the twelve apostles, from the same artist, was brought to New York at least forty years ago and exhibited in what was known as the Crystal Palace or the World's Fair (1) (Fig 2).

Gilman went on to justify the rationale for placing a work of art in a hospital setting by citing precedents for such at Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia and St. Luke's in New York (Fig 3). He defended the choice of a religious theme by emphasizing the role of Christ as the "Great Healer" and "Great Physician" and likening the Hospital to the medieval "House of Mercy" or "Hôtel-Dieu." After delivering his rather lengthy rendition, President Gilman concluded the program with special praise to Mr. Spence for his beneficence not only to the Hospital and University, but also to the greater Baltimore community.

Fig 2. The plaster casts from the Thorwaldsen Museum were exhibited at the New York Crystal Palace in 1854. The engraving shown above appeared in the catalog of the New York Exhibition.
A Scots emigré, William Wallace Spence had become a highly successful businessman since his arrival in Baltimore in 1841 at the age of 26. Although twenty years his junior, Mr. Spence had been an associate of Johns Hopkins and in Mr. Hopkins’s later years, a member of his inner circle of friends. Supportive of Mr. Hopkins’s early plans for the Hospital and University, Mr. Spence in his own lifetime made numerous generous contributions to both institutions. Most notable among his gifts in other sectors of Baltimore are the great spire of First and Franklin Street Presbyterian Church and the statue of his namesake, the Scots patriot William Wallace, in Druid Hill Park.

How Spence came to choose the Christus Consolator for the Hospital is a curious tale in which Daniel C. Gilman, first President of the Hospital and University, played a most significant role, perhaps even the lead. Seven years earlier at the opening ceremonies of the Hospital in 1889, Gilman had voiced an explicit wish that a copy of the Christus Consolator be placed in the rotunda of the Hospital. In his address, the title of which is “Charity and Knowledge,” Gilman attempted to weave a deft defense for medical research in the name of furthering Christian charity and relief of suffering. He stirringly concluded his talk with a plea that “might some friend of this hospital place beneath this dome a copy of Thorwaldsen’s Christus Consolator, with the outstretched hands of mercy, to remind each passer-by—the physician and the nurse as they pursue their ministry of relief; the student as he begins his daily task; and the sufferer from injury or disease, that over all this institution rests the perpetual benediction of Christian charity, the constant spirit of ‘good will to man’” (4).

The correspondence files of Daniel C. Gilman reveal that on May 20, 1889—just 13 days after he had delivered his address at the opening ceremonies for the Hospital, in which he had expressed his wish that a copy of Thorwaldsen’s Christus Consolator be placed in the Hospital—he wrote to Count W. Spondeck, Royal Danish Legation in Washington to inquire as to whether it would be possible to obtain a copy of the Thorwaldsen statue for The Johns Hopkins Hospital. The Count Spondeck responded promptly and graciously on May 22, 1889, saying, “I can assure you that the Danes will be glad to see the principal work of their great master represented in America and that every facility will be given in the matter.” The Count added that he intended to be in Denmark during the summer and would take “great pleasure in arranging things” and would find “some competent sculptor to do the work” (5). On September 15, 1889, Spondeck wrote again with the information that a copy in Carrara marble could be executed for 20,000 Danish crowns (approximately $5,360) (5). A period of five years lapsed before an offer of a copy of the Thorwaldsen Christus was made to the Hospital Trustees. On November 13, 1894, the Minutes of the Hospital Trustees record that the offer of Mr. Spence was on the agenda for consideration. At that meeting the following resolution was unanimously adopted:

Resolved: That the Board of Trustees accepts with sincere thanks the generous offer of Mr. W. W. Spence to place “Thorwaldsen’s Statue of Christ” immediately under the Dome in the main hall of [the] Administration Building, and that a Committee consisting of Mr. White, Mr. McLane and Dr. Hurd be appointed to convey to Mr. Spence the thanks of the Board, and to co-operate with him in arranging all necessary details. (6)

Why Gilman had been so intent upon acquiring the Christus Consolator for the Hospital is open to some speculation. Conjecture is that his choice of the Christus Consolator was an attempt to offset the criticism that both he and Johns Hopkins officials had received in 1876 at the opening of the University. The more conservative elements of Baltimore had been wary of the fact that plans for the new university did not include any measure of religious affiliation. Their fears grew when it was learned that the British scientist, Thomas Huxley, would be the principal speaker at the ceremonies marking the opening of the University. In Baltimore and elsewhere the eminent Huxley’s writings were considered dangerous and irreligious by the anti-evolutionists. Therefore, the controversy surrounding the University’s choice of speaker only intensified when the ceremonies marking the opening were conducted without the grace of either invocation or benediction. Considering that most of the Trustees of the newly formed University were Quakers, the omission of prayers from the program was not a simple oversight, but an act of religious principle. The Trustees, it seems, had not taken into account the effect the incendiary combination of Quaker ideals and daring choice of speaker would have upon the community. The reaction was widespread.

A correspondent from The New York Observer was present and wrote an account for his paper in which he sensationalized the lack of prayers at the ceremonies.
The choice of this memorial day of a welcome achievement in arms for the opening address of the new University established by the munificence of Mr. Johns Hopkins, was very appropriate and wise. But, much to the regret of many of its friends, it will be known that this interesting occasion was unattended even by the simplest of religious exercises which heretofore have been invariably associated in this Christian land with events of its character and its importance. . . . There were many in the audience who were shocked at the disrespect paid to religion. Nor did we expect it possible for such a neglect to be perpetuated under President Gilman, who at Yale College gave such interesting Sunday evening lectures to the students. . . . The gentlemen at the head of the University were well aware of this. But if the neglect was due to the unchristian or materialistic sentiments of the authorities, then we can only say, God help them, and keep students away from the precincts of the young institution. We want none such transplanted on this soil. We await with much anxiety the future action of the authorities of The Johns Hopkins University.” (7)

The blasts and jibes of the press went on for months. In The Launching of a University, which was published in 1905, Gilman wrote that it took years before the “black eye had regained its natural colour” and the public had ceased to maintain a long and careful vigilance for impiety (8). Sentiments were aroused most especially in religious circles. Gilman himself published one of the many letters that had been written by exercised citizens in The Launching of a University. The letter writer quoted by Gilman was a Presbyterian minister from New York writing to a Presbyterian minister in Baltimore. His comments, perhaps, most aptly expressed the public's shock. While the minister writing was aghast at the choice of Huxley and lamented the lack of prayers, he on the other hand felt that it would have been “absurd” to have had both God and Huxley present at the same occasion (8).

It is an interesting coincidence to note in those newspaper accounts covering the opening of the University in 1876 and the opening of the Hospital in 1889 that William Wallace Spence was listed among the distinguished guests in attendance at both occasions. The fact that Mr. Spence, a pillar in the Presbyterian community, was the particular individual who had responded to Gilman’s public request that a copy of Thorwaldsen’s Christus Consolator be given to the Hospital leaves room

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Fig 4. Christus-Saal (“Christ-Room”) in the Thorwaldsen Museum. Pictured are the plaster casts which were the models for the marble statues of Christ and the Apostles commissioned for the Frue Kirke in Copenhagen.

Courtesy of the Thorwaldsen Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark.
for speculation. Since the Presbyterians, of all the various religious denominations in Baltimore, were most outraged by Huxley's address and the lack of Christian decorum at the opening ceremonies of the University, it appears that William Wallace Spence's generosity might in another guise have been an act of appeasement. As Mr. Spence was, perhaps, one of the wealthiest and most prominent Presbyterians in the city, his gesture seems somewhat reconciliatory in nature. While he brought a Presbyterian's endorsement to the innovative and progressive Johns Hopkins Hospital, he at the same time had managed to imbue this non-sectarian institution with a religious presence.

Gilman and other Hopkins officials obviously felt the need to quell any public concern that might arise over a hospital with no religious affiliation which was designed primarily for teaching and research. The placing of the Christus Consolator in one of the most conspicuous public areas of the new hospital would, therefore, offer a strong note of punctuation to the premise that religious ideals were very much part of the institution. As has been earlier described, Gilman emphatically promoted the concept of the Christus Consolator as the "Great Physician" and the "Great Healer" in his address at the presentation of the statue. Publicly affirming his religious convictions at that occasion, he stated that the statue represented the One who had "wrought more cures, and more wonderful cures than any physician or surgeon that had ever lived."

A CONTEMPORARY APPRAISAL OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS CHRISTUS CONSOLATOR

How is Thorwaldsen's statue of Christ regarded in these last decades of the twentieth century? Its coolness, its neoclassic visage, carefully adhering to Thorwaldsen's commitment to the Greek ideal, and its Herculean qualities move us differently today. A century and one quarter ago, an aesthete and connoisseur could unblushingly call it a premier work of all time, and apostrophize the artist who designed it as the greatest sculptor since the days of the ancients, the greatest original genius since the sixteenth century, who for grandeur, serene and com-
Fig 6. Plaster casts of original sketch models of the Christus Consolator. A. Height, 60 cm. Rome, circa 1821. B. Height, 55.7 cm. Rome, circa 1821. C. Half-size model; height, 141.5 cm. Probably modeled by Pietro Tenerani in 1821, from Thorwaldsen’s design and under his direction.

Courtesy of the Thorwaldsen Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark.
manding beauty was the superior of Michelangelo and Raphael. Other nineteenth-century figures less concerned with artistic tradition saw Thorwaldsen's ideal representation of Christ as the only one which had universal and nondenominational appeal. Some of the force of the ideal, if not of art, yet clings to the statue. As a piece of sculpture in an architectural setting, the Christus Consolator works exceptionally well. It fills the vast vertical openness of the rotunda without engulfing it. Stationed in a centrally located, circular space with a series of radial accesses and ascending balconies, it has arresting impact from any number of approaches. Over the years, the Christus Consolator has become an integral part of its environment, serving as a focal point in various hospital traditions and commemorative events. From an annual Christmas caroling service to the farewell ceremonies for the Hopkins Hospital Units in World War II, the statue of the Christus Consolator has presided and set a tenor. No graffiti profane the statue, even though the pedestal has been set deliberately low in order that observers can come close.

"To stand for centuries" was the banner headline of the Baltimore American on October 15, 1896, the date the Christus Consolator was presented to The Johns Hopkins Hospital. In recent years its preservation does, indeed, seem to be guaranteed. The Administration Building which houses the Christus was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1975, thus affording a measure of permanency to both the statue and its monumental setting.

AN APPENDIX RELATING TO THE ORIGINAL DESIGN FOR THE CHRISTUS CONSOLATOR AND ITS SUBSEQUENT COPIES

The original model for the Christus Consolator was executed by Bertel Thorwaldsen in 1821 as part of a large commission for the Frue Kirke in Copenhagen which also included colossal figures of the Apostles (Fig 4). In 1854 the final full size plaster models which had been used in replicating the marble versions of Christus Consolator and the Apostles at the Frue Kirke in Copenhagen were placed on exhibit by the Danish government at the first international fair to be held in America. Displayed at the New York Crystal Palace, the Christus Consolator and the Apostles achieved widespread acclaim from the American public (Fig 2). The oustsize figures seemed to appeal to both the aesthetic tastes and the religious sentiments of the times—an idealization of Christian charity on a monumental scale. The catalog for the exhibition, The Industry of All Nations, advises those Americans "who have never been in Europe" that seeing the Thorwaldsen models "affords the best opportunity they can ask for seeing how sculpture may be made to express the sublimest conceptions." (9)

In Copenhagen between 1894 and 1896, with the same plaster model that had been used for the marble version of the Christus Consolator at the Frue Kirke and which had been exhibited in New York forty years earlier, a marble replication of the Christus Consolator was sculpted for The Johns Hopkins Hospital. Theobald Stein, Director of the Royal Academy of Arts in Copenhagen, had been engaged to do the job. Following the same measuring procedures that had been employed by Thorwaldsen's studio, Stein transferred the plaster model into marble. While using Thorwaldsen's design and techniques, the only essential difference between the Hopkins Christus and the Frue Kirke Christus is that Thorwaldsen, having died in 1844, did not supervise the marble version for Hopkins.

In the way of nineteenth century sculptors, Thorwaldsen was primarily a designer and a worker in clay, a fashioner of rough ideas which were then realized in a sequence of steps by a team of assistants. Thorwaldsen usually began his studies for a piece of sculpture with multiple pen-and-ink or pencil drawings. These were not careful and exacting studies, but rather hasty sketches in which he attempted to explore the overall "possibilities of a composition" (10). (In the instance of the Christus Consolator, three early pencil sketches have been located in the Thorwaldsen Museum in Copenhagen which show the sculptor's early and varied ideas for the Christus. Two are shown as Figures 5A and B.) When Thorwaldsen had finally articulated a concept for a piece of sculpture through one of his drawings, he would then translate it into a clay sketch model 50-60 centimeters high. Thorwaldsen would himself quickly shape these sketch models, which were on the whole characterized by a sense of motion and spontaneity. In order to preserve these, the clay sketch models were cast in plaster. Two of the sketch models for the Christus Consolator survive (Figs 6A and B). Typical of Thorwaldsen's style, these two sketch models have a greater, more spontaneous sense of life than the final version (10).

After the sketch models were completed, the next step was the construction of a large-scale figure in clay by a team of assistants. They would work on a rotating modeling stand which had a branching armature of wires and metal rods. The assistants with their hands, trowels and various modeling tools would work the clay over the armature, with Thorwaldsen carefully supervising and sometimes altering the figure as it assumed shape. Features and more precise details were added to this larger model, which was then cast in plaster. Pietro Tenerani, one of Thorwaldsen's most able assistants in Rome, is believed to have executed the final plaster model for the Christus Consolator (10) (Fig 6C).

This half-size plaster figure was then used as the model for the final marble version of the sculpture. Assistants would do the work of transferring the plaster sculpture to marble with the use of assorted measuring devices. Rows of points that had been marked on the plaster model by pencil were transferred to a block of marble by plumb lines and a measuring form. Masons would do the initial rough-hewing of the marble and leave the detail work to the assistants. The master himself would even add an occasional perfecting touch with his own chisel (10). It is easy to see how widespread Thorwaldsen's influence became in the nineteenth century. His near-mechanistic techniques allowed exact replicas of his original work to be reproduced.

As is evidenced by Figure 6B, the figure of Christ had at one point been modeled in clay by Thorwaldsen in a triumphant pose. The arms are raised and gesture commandingly with a strong, thrown-back head. One apocryphal legend is that dampness in the studio had caused an early triumphant-style model to sag before it had sufficiently dried. The story relates that at first Thorwaldsen was distressed, but was later moved by the changed mood of the model which had been brought about by the bowed head and lowered arms. The change of gesture alone had transformed the figure into a major expression of humility and sympathy—hence the Christus Consolator (11). Like most legends this one seems to contain a seminal element of truth. Thorwaldsen, after making numerous models for the figure of Christ in a variety of moods, ultimately chose that of the consolator.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend warm and most grateful thanks to my husband, Charles W. Mann, whose help in locating bibliographic sources seems to have been outmatched only by his appreciation for nineteenth century sculpture. At the same time I would like to express special appreciation to Dr. Samuel Boyer for his patient efforts in nurturing this article. To Helle De Simone of the Phipps Clinic at The Johns Hopkins Hospital, I owe the translations from Danish of three letters from the archive of the Thorwaldsen Museum. In addition, I wish to thank the following persons for their generous assistance with my many reference queries: Monika Blatschek (Thorwaldsen Museum), Louise Cavagnaro (The Johns Hopkins Hospital), Lynn Cox (The Peale Museum), Ann Gwyn (Special Collections, Milton S. Eisenhower Library), Eva Henschen (Thorwaldsen Museum), Jacques Kelly (The News American), Julia Morgan (The Ferdinand Hamburger, Jr. Archives of The Johns Hopkins University), Robert Sink (The New York Public Library), Doris Thibodeau (Institute of the History of Medicine, The Johns Hopkins University).

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