Chief Joseph

Anonymous

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SCULPTURE labors under the disadvantage of having in most cases to carry out a subject or make a likeness at the bidding of some one else besides the artist himself. In painting there is more chance for an independent choice of topic, though the painted portrait is usually undertaken under the same hampering bonds. Luckily Mr. Olin I. Warner, while travelling in the West, happened to be on the Cherokee Reservation when Chief Joseph, the famous leader of the Nez Perces, was expected at army head−quarters. He waited until the old chief arrived, and used such arguments that in the course of several sittings he obtained the bass−relief medallion which is here to be seen [illustration omitted]. It was shown at the National Academy last spring, but hardly received the place and the attention it deserved. The portrait is a true labor of love on the part of the sculptor, and while it gives one of the many types of our North−American Indians, is said to be an excellent likeness of the warrior.

The remnant of the Nez Perces to which Joseph belongs are now on a portion of the Cherokee Reservation, purchased in 1878 from the Cherokees. It is a square containing about 91,000 acres, lying across the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River, just above that which was bought for the Poncas. They have the Poncas on the east, and the Otoes and Missourias on the southeast. Kansas lies well to the north, and one crosses the big Osage Reservation when approaching it from the eastward. After their capitulation to General Miles in 1877, the remnant of the tribe, numbering 431 souls, were taken to Fort Leavenworth, where the location of their camp was so unhealthy that they lost many by disease. They were removed to their reservation on the Salt Fork in 1879, whence it has been proposed to move them again, in pursuance of the hand−to−hand policy which has affected Cherokees, Osages, and other larger nations in their gradual removal to the West before the swarming settlers. It was probably because of business relating to the further removal of the Indians that Chief Joseph came within range of our sculptor, and found himself immortalized in clay. Though he had ridden hard for many days to reach head−quarters, the old chief was fresh and alert. But, curiously enough, he found that sitting for his portrait was quite a different task from sitting a horse. Mr. Warner says that it wearied Chief Joseph exceedingly, far more than it does white men who are much less vigorous.

The Nez Perces belonged in what is now the State of Idaho, and the greater part of the tribe remained on reservations in that Territory. A few years ago several thousands were flourishing in the northern part of the Territory, having farms, schools, and churches. Other accounts make them out as debased by drink and the vices of white adventurers. A minority of the Nez Perces never agreed to the cession of their lands, and occupied the army for some months at various times in making them submit. The name given the Nez Perces by the French coureurs de bois is singularly inappropriate, as they do not mutilate their noses, and seem never to have done so as a tribe, whatever may have been the fashion in some branch of their kindred. The Sahaptins, for example, who have given the name to a congeries of tribes including the Nez Perces, are said to have bored the nose in order to carry a nose ornament like the Hindoo women and some tribes of Brazil.

Chief Joseph calls himself Hin−mah−too−yah−lat−kekht, and the tribe is said to use Numepo as their preferred title, though nomenclature among Indians is a parlous thing, many names at the same time and different names at different epochs being the fashion with them individually and in the mass. He is a very high type of Indian as regards brains and courage, but he possesses many of the peculiarities of the savage. His eyes are dull and his features stolid as a rule, but if a bird passes, an animal makes a sound in the bush, an insect comes within earshot or eyesight, something happens in that vacant look. Things that we do not regard have hidden meanings to him, either in connection with the weather, or by reason of superstitions which link certain results with certain appearances, or because the sight of one animal or insect has to do with the presence or the absence of another. The sculptor says that only when some beast, bird, or insect was in sight did the old chief look the warrior and the Indian. When that was gone he relapsed into the apparently unthinking state of an animal, and showed very plainly that to remain in one position while the clay was modelling itself under the artist's fingers was a penance

greater than to wait immovable for hours until game revealed itself or an enemy crept in sight.

Chief Joseph belongs to the light−colored Indians. As most people are aware, the native races vary in tint from a brown that approaches the blackness of a negro to a light coffee−color not so dark as many Europeans. The Quichuas of Peru are very black, and the Heidahs of Queen Charlotte and Blackfeet of the Saskatchewan are fair. The Pammas of Brazil are lighter than many Spaniards and Portuguese, while the Iroquois and Algonquin tribes are coppery or light brown. But what is often overlooked is the apparent unimportance of climate on the color of the Indians under the arctic circle or at the equator. Were it not for the broad plaits of hair and absence of beard, giving to Chief Joseph that curious resemblance, in our eyes, to an old woman which we see in so many Indians, the face might be that of a European. As heavy lips, as bent a nose, as high a cheek−bone, may be seen in any crowd of white men. The forehead is good, and the brain cavity ample. In sailors and woodsmen we find the same close−lipped, somewhat saturnine expression.

On the artistic side one may note how Mr. Warner has felt the building up of the cranium and jaw, and how strongly yet subtly he has modelled the texture of the face. From the inscription the marks of quotation might well be spared at the words Joseph and Nez Perce, while the word Indians itself might be criticised as redundant.

Chief Joseph, as we all know, had a claim to the Wallowa Valley in Oregon, dating from the Stevens treaty in 1855, and conceded again to him and his tribe of about 500 Indians in 1873 by General Grant, while the latter was President. Two years later the concession of June 16, 1873, was revoked, and the Wallowa Valley was thrown into the public domain along with all of Oregon west of the Snake River. In 1877 it was determined to remove the Nez Perces from Oregon to the reservation in Idaho, and General Howard reported that they had agreed to go, not willingly, but under constraint. Some whites were killed, and Chief White Bird sent word that he would not remove, whereupon an unequal war began between retreating bands of Nez Perces and companies of United States cavalry, aided by volunteers. The Indians crossed the Yellowstone Park and River, endeavoring to escape into British territory, but were followed closely by Howard, and headed off by General, then Colonel Miles. In the battle that ensued near the mouth of Eagle Creek 6 chiefs and 25 warriors were killed, and 38 men wounded. Two officers and 21 men were killed and 4 officers and 38 men wounded on the side of the pursuers. The whole camp of about 450 men, women, and children fell into Colonel Miles's hands. General Howard reached the battle−field just in time to be present at the surrender.

Chief Joseph conducted this retreat with very extraordinary skill. He beat Colonel Gibbon with 15 officers, 146 troopers, and 34 volunteers, though with much loss of men. He stampeded General Howard's horses and pack−train, fought Colonel Sturgis on the Yellowstone River, losing many horses, and came very near making good his retreat to British America. Of this campaign General Sherman has said: "The Indians throughout displayed a courage and skill that elicited universal praise; they abstained from scalping; let captive women go free; did not commit indiscriminate murder of peaceful families, which is usual; and fought with almost scientific skill, using advance and rear guards, skirmish lines, and field fortifications." These facts only make harder the fate that awaited them, for it shows that no forbearance, no bravery and generalship, are able to win for Indians justice. The right of the Nez Perces to the Wallowa Valley was perfect, and the killing of four white men possibly but not certainly by Indians was made the pretext of hunting them down and letting them die of disease at Fort Leavenworth. By neglecting to provide means to prevent tyranny and land−grabbing on the part of its white citizens our government is constantly forced to violate the most solemn treaties, and confess itself unworthy of trust. The weakness and injustice of our dealing with Indians was never shown in a more picturesque and striking example than in our conduct toward this little section of the Nez Perces. It is only fair to say, however, that we have had recent examples in which the government realized that the nation has a duty to perform in protecting Indians against encroachments by white settlers, and the troops were used in a more honorable exploit than hunting down men with whom the nation had broken a solemn compact.