V. MURALS, MORALS AND THE GREEKS

"... to impregnate that atmosphere with the aroma of historical association." - Wells

One influential professional journal regarded murals as "dreams which every architect who has a fancy for colored decoration occasionally sees floating before his imagination... [and] there is no limit to which this great American art may be carried."¹

Nineteenth-century taste for extravagantly scaled pictures was a predisposing factor in American acceptance; the public had not had much exposure to wall paintings until, under Richardson's aegis, precedents were set in Trinity Church and the Albany Capitol building; architectural journals and popular magazines promulgated the idea that murals were desirable, inspirational and beautiful, and appreciation rapidly developed. The American Architect and Building News commented with satisfaction on the trend to "make the best of our artistic resources... A few years ago not many Americans

¹American Architect and Building News, LIX (Mar. 5, 1898), 73.
would have dared ask an artist of reputation to paint a wall. Today we fancy, few artists would refuse. "¹ And still further admiration was aroused in 1893 as World's Columbian Exposition visitors enthusiastically responded to the grandly conceived, monumental decorations lavished on walls and ceilings of Fair buildings (Ills. 62-63).

Muralists, painters and sculptors alike placed heavy emphasis on subject matter and—more to the point—message. Catering to contemporary aesthetic standards, the Exposition's sponsors installed pretentious displays of academic works in the Palace of Fine Arts; slick handling and technical expertise often masked banal material, for artists of the nineties endowed their moralistic pictures with theatrical and unobscure symbols: drowning orphans and chaste muses were as likely to turn up as works bearing such titles as Love's Curse, The Cloister or the World?, and The Broken Idol. The public was especially enamored of classical allegory and legend and painters recklessly borrowed Greek themes, attitudes and costumes from every available source to produce far-removed, if sincere versions (Ills. 64-67). Idealistic themes were thought to be perfectly suited to general viewing, but an American iconography was still

¹ American Architect and Building News, IV (Nov. 30, 1878), 153. Murals were so new to Americans that the terminology itself was inexact, and "fresco" signified any large painting applied to wall or ceiling.
lacking. "In the years to come," Larkin commented, "one building after another would perpetuate their fallacies upon its walls—the relaxed postures, the legato rhythms, and the cautious interpolation of modern dress among the chitons and togas."¹

Wells exhibited a watercolor painting, The Great Enchantment, in the Palace of Fine Arts and most probably attended the celebrated Fair as well; he must have been impressed by what he saw, and judging by his own later work, found the murals of Walter McEwen and Gari Melchers particularly unforgettable.

The commission to paint the murals at the University of Illinois marked the high point in Wells' artistic career; he was forty-seven years old when he made the trip West to begin the work—work which ultimately proved rewarding but arduous. The library was part of a great institution of learning, and the problem, Wells related, was to make the interior "not only exhale an atmosphere of quiet and reposeful dignity that should be in keeping with their uses, but also to impregnate that atmosphere with the aroma of historical association."³

¹Larkin, 317.

²Official Catalogue of the World's Columbian Exposition (Chicago, 1893), 33.

³Chicago Sunday Tribune, Mar. 14, 1900. Voluble and expansive, Wells' cultural milieu was revealed in his public statements, articles and letters; they provide a major source of information for his artistic techniques and the iconography of his murals.
Despite all the Romanesque-derived decorations that Wells had painstakingly stenciled and painted, it is clear that his own historical and artistic commitment was to things Greek—the academic conglomerate that the nineteenth century accepted as Greek.

In 1897, Wells and Professor C. M. Moss were credited with being introducers of the first Greek tableaux ever presented to an American university audience (Ills. 68-70). The singing of the "Hymn to Apollo" was reported to be "solemn and weird," and as the figures appeared in the scene of "Homer, the Blind Bard" in the "pale blue light of the stereopticon, nothing in marble could have been more real. All recognized Dr. Burrill instantly, and his pose was perfect."¹ (Ill. 7) And the spectators responded with accolades, added the Illio, for the experience was a "distinctly aesthetic one, filling the eye for a time with noble images, and the mind with suggestions of a splendid past. . . . It was a distinct education upon aesthetic, spiritual lines."²

Wells asserted that he had spent a long time "studying the Greek costumes of a certain period." Imaginative and resourceful artists have traditionally derived ideas from the past and it is likely that Wells—

¹Illini, Nov. 19, 1897.

²Illio, V (1898), 34.
a highly trained painter—knew how to find suitable inspiration in the plethora of ancient and modern models pictured in virtually every medium. A photograph that appeared in an American art book of 1896 (Ill. 72) bears a remarkable resemblance to Wells' pendentive figure (Ill. 71), a coincidence that raises questions about his statement that "all of these figures and compositions are original."³

¹ Champaign County News, Mar. 17, 1900. Wells held a Master of Painting degree from Syracuse University (1880), and had studied at the Académie Julian in Paris for several years.