VI. FRENCH MASTERS

The rotunda murals unmistakably reflect the philosophy, the teaching, and the paintings of Wells’ French mentors. Prior to receiving the commission, the artist wrote that if he were entrusted with the work he would "wish to return to Paris for the execution of the studies of the four compositions so as to benefit from the advice of my two masters." He had been a student at the Académie Julian,

1 Wells to Ricker and White, c. May 14, 1897, University Architect.
under Adolph Bouguereau at first, and then with Jean-Paul Laurens, "the best draughtsman in France," and Benjamin-Constant, "one of the richest and most harmonious colorists of the French school."  

The Académie Julian had reputable salon painters on its faculty and required no entrance examinations--factors which encouraged the enrollment of many foreign students. One Chicago critic was pleased that midwesterners were included, and thought others ought apply themselves to serious and direct academic study: "The simplicity of all great masterpieces is based on an understanding of construction, composition and values, while each decadence in art is marked by inventions, theories and experiments"--an observation expressing the very essence of the academy aesthetic. Robert Henri attended the Académie Julian at about the same time as Wells, and remembered that "among the great numbers of students there were those who searched each other out and formed little groups which met independently of the school, and with art as the central interest talked about everything under the sun. But these small groups were rare." Wells evidently adhered to the prescribed course of study, 

1 Wells to Ricker and White, c. May 14, 1897, University Architect.

2 Herschel B. Chipp, Theories of Modern Art (Berkeley, 1968), 103.

3 M. B. Bowers, "The Art Academy of the Julian Concour," Arts for America, VII (April, 1898), 481-82.

unaware or ignorant of the experimenters of his day—impressionists, symbolists, and others who altered the course of art.

Solid artistic training was paramount at the Academy, and the literal copying of plaster casts and drawing from the nude model required exercises. But the school, as Henri knew it, was "a great cabaret with singing and huge practical jokes, and as such, was a wonder. It was a factory, too, where thousands of drawings of human surfaces were turned out."¹

Bouguereau (1825-1905) was one of the most acclaimed painters of his time, his pictures ranging from what may be the ultimate in French "flesh painting" (Ill. 8) to canvases centering on sacred themes—both kinds produced with unfaltering aplomb. "Of the idyllic school he is one of the leading masters," wrote Bancroft, "and few are there whose works have been so widely appreciated throughout the world."² Because of his reputation, it is not unreasonable to assume that his works inspired imitation.

Technical adroitness and fine draughtsmanship were valued by Benjamin-Constant (1845-1902), and his compositions often conveyed

¹Henri, 104-105.

²Hubert Howe Bancroft, The Book of the Fair, IV (Chicago, 1893), 707. One of Bouguereau's paintings was described as "one of the latest and best examples of his much-prized and much-derided flesh paintings." William Walton, World's Columbian Exposition Art and Architecture, II (Philadelphia, 1893), 43.
an Eastern, exotic mood (Ill. 75). Wells' portraits\(^1\) are superior to his mural paintings, and we may presume that he learned a great deal from this master, an able portraitist.

The American painter E. H. Blashfield told of Laurens\(^1\) (1838-1921) consuming interest in past ages, his desire for grand drama simply expressed. Such scenes would seem to require frenzy and haste but Laurens' insistence that his subjects "stand about motionless" contributes to the serene and tranquil character of his canvases\(^2\) (Ill. 74); Wells was an apt pupil, in that his own work tended to be static. In recounting the story of the University murals, Wells used the phrases "reposeful dignity" and "peaceful repose" several times, saying that mural compositions should be treated with a reserve and a reposeful dignity that will never weary the beholder by the violence of color contrasts and the insistency of line arrangements, or oppress the spirits by an appeal to emotions that are morbid and depressing. Garishness and triviality on the one hand, and somberness and morbid solemnity on the other, are the Scylla and the Charybdis between which the mural painter must steer if he would escape the rocks of adverse criticism and the whirlpool of sensationalism.\(^3\)

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1. Wells' portraits of Burrill and Draper are hung in the main Library, and a portrait of Ricker is in the Architecture Building.
