'Effigy of Victoire Auguste Antoinette of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Duchesse de Nemours' (1822-1857)

Henri Michel Antoine Chapu (Le Mée-sur-Seine, near Paris, 1833 - 1891 Paris)

Artwork details

Medium and Support: Carved from white marble
Dimensions: length 229 cm x depth 91.5 cm x height 53.5 cm
Date: 1881-83
Signed: Signed on the box at the figure’s feet: H Chapu
Accession No: WAG 1994.129

Carved around the flat edge of the base in a continuous line of text is a Latin inscription which reads in translation:

‘Here lies Victoria Augusta Antonia de Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, Duchess of Nemours, by whose death one more sorrow was added to so many doleful burials of the House of Orleans. She was of excellent soul, brilliance and great beauty, equally admirable both in fortune and of kindly and humble heart, devoted to her God, and a most loving wife and mother, lamented by her relatives and all notable people. She died suddenly at Claremont in Britain, an untimely death, on 10 November 1857 at the age of 35. May she rest in peace.'
Exterior of St Charles Borromeo, Weybridge

The tomb effigy of the Duchess of Nemours was originally carved, sometime between August 1881 and 5 October 1883, for the small domed and castellated mausoleum chapel attached to the formerly Roman Catholic church of St. Charles Borromeo, in Weybridge, Surrey.

Interior of St Charles Borromeo, Weybridge, 1981

The church crypt temporarily housed the tombs of the exiled French King Louis-Philippe (died 1850), who was the Duchess of Nemours’ father-in-law, and twelve other members of the French royal family, who died in England between 1856 and 1876. Louis-Philippe and the Orléans family had fled into exile from the Paris revolution of 1848 and had been housed by Queen Victoria on the nearby royal estate of Claremont, near Esher, Surrey. Queen Victoria, despite the political dangers, of which she was warned by her Prime Minister, was very supportive of the exiled King and his family, whom she had first met in France in 1843. This event was celebrated as the first meeting between French and English monarchs since 1520. As well as offering shelter she encouraged courtiers to write letters to 'The Times' sympathising with the plight of “these poor exiles” and often invited the Duchess of Nemours in particular, of whom she was very fond, to stay privately at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight.
The Orléans family tombs remained in the Weybridge chapel until the French royal family were allowed to return to France in 1876 and all the royal remains, excepting those of the Duchess of Nemours, were removed and re-interred at the royal chapel of the Orléans family at Dreux in Normandy. Her remains stayed at Weybridge until 1979 when her body, but not her tomb effigy, was transferred to Dreux to join that of her husband. In letters to Queen Victoria in 1876 the Duke of Nemours explained that he and his children wished for the Duchess’s body to remain in its ‘modest and respectable retreat’ and was greatly satisfied to hear from the Queen that she shared these feelings, because of her great affection for his family. He turned down, however, the Queen’s offer of arranging to place a commemorative effigy on the bare tomb slab, although he was happy to accept her advice on the matter.

The Duchess was a close and beloved cousin of both Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. She was a childhood playmate of the Prince’s at Rosenau, his German home, and considered by the Queen to be a bosom friend “like a dear sister to us” and called “my beloved Vic”. As well as sharing first names both the Queen and the younger Duchess had married in the same year, 1840. In 1852 the Queen commissioned the painter Franz Xavier Winterhalter (1805-1873) to portray the namesake cousins holding hands as a birthday present for the Duchess’s other cousin Prince Albert. Five years later, after the Duchess’s death, the Queen wrote that she had been: “so dear, so good, one of those pure, virtuous unobtrusive characters who make a home peaceful, cheerful and happy”. Charlotte Canning, the Queen’s Lady-in-Waiting, didn’t share her royal mistress’s enthusiasm, agreeing that though she was very pretty and nice to look at: “besides having a tiresome voice she has nothing to say.” Her fame was spread further when in 1856 a finely scented double white variety of the Peony flower (Paonia lactiflora ‘Duchesse de Nemours’) was named after her in France.

Watercolour, The Royal Collection
When the Duchess died suddenly on 10 November 1857, only ten days after she had given birth to her fourth child, Blanche, both the Queen and her husband were ‘deeply afflicted’ and ‘completely upset’, and rushed to visit the family on the following day. The Queen provided a highly melodramatic account of the death to Lord Clarendon:

“We visited the house of mourning yesterday and no words can describe the scene of woe... There was the broken-hearted, almost distracted widower... and lastly, there was in one room the lifeless, but oh! even in its ghostliness, most beautiful form of his young, lovely, and angelic wife, lying in her bed with her splendid hair covering her shoulders, and a heavenly expression of peace; and in the next room, the dear little pink infant sleeping in its cradle... The dear Duchess’s death must have been caused by some affection of the heart, for she was perfectly well, having her hair combed, suddenly exclaimed to the Nurse, “Oh! mon Dieu, Madame” - her head fell on one side - and before the Duke could run upstairs her hand was cold!” 10.

Prince Albert wrote equally emotionally to his brother on November 11 and described her as looking "like an angel of beauty, her glorious hair falling over her bosom”. To commemorate her cousin the Queen also compiled an album which included a watercolour of the ‘Duchesse de Nemours on her deathbed, after death, 10 November 1857’. This shows her in a similar pose to that adopted by the sculptor Chapu for the tomb effigy11.

Chapu would never have seen the Duchess alive as his effigy was carved some 24 years after her sudden death, nor is he known to have visited England. His serene evocation of the youthful but dead princess must have derived from portraits of her. There is some evidence that he was sent a plaster cast of a portrait bust of the Duchess. On 12 June 1880 Princess Beatrice wrote, on behalf of her mother the Queen, to the Duke of Nemours, that: “the cast of the bust of dear Aunt Victoire that you would like to have is ready and Mother will send it to you. She is very happy for you to have it. I will put you in contact with a sculptor for the monument at Weybridge.”12 The bust from which Queen Victoria had a cast made may have been that by Carlo Marochetti (1805-1867), whose portrait bust of the 'Duchess of Nemours' of about 1857 is still in the Royal Collection13. Despite the Duke’s polite rebuff of Queen Victoria’s offer in 1876 to make arrangements for a tomb effigy she had not been easily deterred. On 7 January 1880 she wrote to him asking whether he had yet decided about the monument, and a year later on 4 January 1881 she wanted to know why he hadn’t discussed further with her the monument that she so wanted to have placed at Weybridge14. She monitored the progress of the monument closely, requesting and receiving photographs of the plaster model, presumably the model now in the
Musée Chapu, and the finished marble. The plaster model for the effigy was finished in July 1881 and by 5 October 1883 the finished marble was in place in a specially constructed alcove on the south of the nave of the recently built extension. Finally on 29 July 1884 the Queen paid a visit to the Weybridge chapel, as recorded in the Court Circular, and a month later expressed herself “greatly satisfied with the monument and all the other arrangements” in the chapel.

Chapu may also have been helped by descriptions of the Duchess’s body from the Duke as he certainly changed his mind in the course of drawing up his designs for the monument. The Musée Chapu has at least one pen and ink drawing for the commission, showing several sketches for the tomb plinth and three for the figure itself. The small studies show that one of Chapu’s original ideas for the effigy was to portray the Duchess with her hands crossed over her chest. This was a more traditional pose for a tomb effigy, derived from the sculpture of Medieval and Renaissance France, in which the deceased was depicted lying on the lid of the sarcophagus. However, something or someone prompted Chapu to reinterpret the tradition. He chose instead for the final monument a more romantic pose, closer to the attitude of the Duchess on her deathbed, with one hand trailing gracefully beside her body and the other resting on the drapery over her breast, her celebrated long flowing hair tumbling past her shoulder and spilling over the plinth’s inscription. All of this imparts a sense of naturalism as if her image had been captured whilst drifting off to sleep. The only evidence from the Duchess’s peaceful form that she is dead is that she is covered from neck to feet in a rippling shroud placed over her robe. Her status as a member of the French royal family is indicated by the two shields at her feet bearing the Orléans coat of arms surmounted by a ducal coronet.

A fashion for ‘sleeping’ female tomb figures had begun in France in the 1860s. Chapu brought it to a successful climax firstly with his monument to the Duchess of Nemours and two years later with the even more moving tomb effigy of her sister-in-law, the ‘Duchesse d’Orléans’, in the Royal
Chapel at Dreux\textsuperscript{19}. The pose of the left hand on the chest and the other resting beside the body became popular and Chapu was requested to provide it for his marble low relief for the tomb of 'Laure Labiche', which he sculpted in 1883 for the cemetery of Béville-le-Comte (Eure-et-Loir)\textsuperscript{20}. With hindsight, the Duke of Nemours’ choice of Chapu to design the monument to his beloved wife was not surprising. Near the end of his life Chapu had become renowned as a funerary sculptor. In fact art critics praised him, saying: "ideally if one wants to leave an immortal trace one should be entombed by Mr. Chapu"\textsuperscript{21}.

Chapu was one of the chief French academic sculptors of the second half of the nineteenth century. He had won a number of prizes, spent five years in Italy (1855-1860) as a student, and returned to receive a number of public and private commissions, sculpting figures to decorate Parisian railway stations, universities and department stores. He had finally come to public recognition in 1872 with a celebrated monument to 'Joan of Arc at Domrémy' (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), which portrayed the heroine as a peasant girl at prayer. Chapu’s election to the Académie des Beaux-arts in 1880 crowned his official career. But when in 1881 Chapu was commissioned by the Duke he had yet to sculpt any reclining tomb effigies. The 'Duchess of Nemours' was to be his first and became regarded as among his best\textsuperscript{22}. In the figure of the 'Duchess of Nemours' Chapu created a poignant expression of a life cut short, whose naturalistic and emotional realism provided a focus for her husband's, her family’s and her royal cousins’ grief.

The sculpture was eventually acquired by the Walker Art Gallery in 1994 after the Roman Catholic church authorities decided controversially to sell the tomb effigy and make its church of St. Charles Borromeo redundant.

Provenance

Commissioned by Louis Charles Philippe Raphael, the Duc de Nemours (1814-1896) for a specially built chapel attached to the Roman Catholic church of St. Charles Borromeo, Heath Street, Weybridge, Surrey, and installed in 1883; removed from church in 1989\textsuperscript{23}; sold Sotheby’s, London, 9 December 1993, lot 93; acquired by National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside for the Walker Art Gallery in 1994 with a contribution from The Art Fund after an export licence had been temporarily deferred.

Literature

- O Fidière, 'Chapu: Sa vie et son oeuvre', Paris, 1894, pp.130-131, 252 illus. opposite p.130
• S Lami, 'Dictionnaire des sculpteurs de l’école française au dix-neuvième siècle', 1914, vol.1, p.330
• Kate Hotine, ‘The Taylors of Weybridge’, 1982, pp.39-41, 47, plate 5
• ‘The Times’, 13/1/1990
• Michael Hall, ‘Comment’ ‘Country Life’, 14 May, 1992
• ‘Diary’ ‘The Independent’ 17 March 1994 p.23
• Anne Pingeot’s entry on ‘Chapu’ in ‘Grove Dictionary of Art’, 1996

Back to the top

Footnotes

1. HIC JACET TOT LUCTUOSIS DOMUS AURELIANENSIS ADDITA FUNERIBUS VICTORIA AUGUSTA ANTONIA de SAXE-COBOURG-GOTHA DUCISSA DE NEMOURS. QUE EGREGIO ANIMA CANDORE ET FORMAE DECORE AEQUE SPECTABILIS IN UTRAQUAE FORTUNA MITIS ET HUMILIS CORDE ET MATER AMANTISSIONE ET DESIDERATISSIMA PROPINQUIS AC NOTIS OMNIBUS DEFLENDA CLARAMONTII IN BRITANNIA. SUBITA ET IMMATURE MORTE PRAEREPTA DECESSIT. DIE NOVEMBRIS X. ANNO DOMINO MDCCCLVII AETATIS XXXV. REQUIESCAT IN PACE.

2. According to a letter from the Duchess's husband, Louis d'Orleans, Duc de Nemours, to Queen Victoria, 21 August 1881, Chapu had put in hand the execution of the effigy in marble having finished the (plaster) model in July, Royal Archives, Windsor Library, (RA VIC/Y 51/194). According to another letter from the Duke to the Queen, 5 October 1883, the effigy had just been installed in the Weybridge chapel (RA VIC/Y 52/14), quoted with the permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. For information on the church, chapel and side chamber specially built to house the Duchess's tomb see Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Buildings of England: Surrey’, 1971, p.51; K Hotine, ‘The Taylors of Weybridge', 1982, p.47.

4. Loose translation by Robin-Mackworth Young of letters from the Duke of Nemours to Queen Victoria, 8 June 1876 and 5 July 1876, copies in Gallery file.


6. 'The Cousins: Queen Victoria and Victoire, Duchesse de Nemours'. For this and other portraits in the Royal Collection see Sir Oliver Millar, 'The Victorian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen', Cambridge, 1992, pp. 149 no.409, 303 no.858, and 295 no.829, for the respective entries on: Sir Edwin Landseer’s sketch of 1839, amusingly portraying her and her spaniel from behind (her hairstyle mirroring that of her dog’s) and its two copies, one of which was given to the Duke of Nemours in 1848; Winterhalter’s three quarter-length portrait of her on her wedding in 1840; and 'The Cousins'.


8. Surtees, as above, p.177 (1849).


10. 'Letters of Queen Victoria', vol.III, pp.322-3. She wrote a similar letter to Lady Canning, adding that the Duke was downstairs reading to his mother at the time of his wife's death, and that Prince Albert also loved her as a sister 'having none of his own', Surtees, pp. 247-249. The Queen may have been particularly affected by the death because she had only recently given birth herself and had 'been so fortunate! The Duchess’s death also coincided with the 40th anniversary of the death of Princess Charlotte (the Prince Regent's daughter and heir) also after childbirth and also at Claremont.

11. RL29285, f.17, catalogued and illustrated in Delia Millar, 'The Victorian Watercolours and Drawings in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen', vol. 1, 1995, pp.39, 992 no.6535, which quotes from another of Queen Victoria’s letters, WRA Z 261/15v/13 November 1857 describing the body with 'her splendid long Curls flowing over her Shoulders, her arms & beautiful hands stretched out'.

12. 'Le moulage que vous desiriez avoir du buste de la chère Tante Victoire est fait, et Maman vous le fera envoyer. Elle est bien contente que vous ayiez. Je vous mettre en rapport avec un sculpteur pour un monument à Weybridge'. Photocopy of a letter in the Belgian archives sent by Dominique Paoli (researching the life of the Duchesse de Nemours) to Diana Keith Neal (Director 19th & 20th-century Sculpture, Sotheby’s) 6/12/1997.

13. RCIN 45138. Information provided by Jonathan Marsden email and letter 12/07/06.

14. Letters in Belgian archives transcribed by Dominique Paoli in her letter to Neal, see above.
15. Inv. MHC 63 in the Musée Chapu, established in his honour in 1887 in his home village of Mée-sur-Seine. Letter from the Duke of Nemours to Queen Victoria, 6 October 1883, has a photograph of the finished marble attached and mentions the sending of a previous photograph of the plaster model, Windsor Royal Archives (RA VIC/Y 52/14 and 52/15).


17. Letter from the Duc de Nemours to his son Alençon, 21 August 1884, as transcribed by Paoli from the Belgian archives.

18. Inv. MHC 983.1.3. The Museum has yet to finish the inventory of all the drawings and the sculptor’s correspondence it holds. The inventory of the drawings should be completed soon, by when more preparatory studies may have emerged. The Louvre also has a large number of drawings by Chapu but none appear to be directly relatable to the Duchess’s tomb.

19. Because the Duchesse d’Orléans was Protestant the Roman Catholic authorities would not allow her body to rest in the same chapel as her husband. It was placed instead in a side-chapel separated by a grill. Chapu carved her trailing hand as if outstretched towards her husband.


22. Fidière, as above, p.131.

23. The effigy was removed from the church on 18 November 1989, a month before the church ceased being used for religious purposes on 23 December in 1989. As an active Roman Catholic church and technically not redundant, it thus avoided the need to apply for listed building consent to remove the effigy. The church was prevented from selling the effigy in 1990 but was eventually successful in 1993, by which time church had been listed (Grade II*) and sold to the World Mission Korean Presbyterian Church. It was given an English Heritage grant of £251,000 to make good the church building in 2005.