

The Recall of Columbus

(January 1492)

The bold Genoan navigator Christopher Columbus, convinced he could reach Asia by sailing westward from Europe, tried to win favor and financial support for his expedition at the courts of Portugal and Spain. The Portuguese king rejected his proposal in 1484. Columbus then went to Spain, where he ultimately approached King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. After years of debate about the merits of Columbus's proposal, the monarchs dismissed him in early 1492, believing his demands too audacious and his attitude too uncompromising. Columbus headed dejectedly for France. But as his party crossed a small bridge near Granada, a royal messenger overtook him to present Queen Isabella's handwritten letter recalling him to court. There, in a change of heart, Isabella pledged her jewels to make possible the voyage of exploration. This historic moment was vividly described by Washington Irving in his widely read *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Working in Spain from newly discovered original documents, Irving created what was to become the standard English-language account of the Columbus story in the 19th century. Here is his narrative of the turning point in Columbus's fortunes:

Columbus had pursued his lonely journey across the Vega and had reached the bridge of Pinos, about two leagues from Granada, at the foot of the mountain of Elvira; a pass famous in the Moorish wars for many a desperate encounter between the Christians and Infidels. Here he was overtaken by a courier from the queen, spurring in all speed, who summoned him to return to Santa Fé. Columbus hesitated for a moment, being loth to subject himself again to the delays and equivocations of the court. When he was informed, however, of the sudden zeal for the enterprise excited in the mind of the queen, and the positive promise she had given to undertake it, he no longer felt a doubt, but, turning the reins of his mule, hastened back with joyful alacrity to Santa Fé, confiding in the noble probity of that princess.¹

Augustus Heaton, little known today, was a painter of portraits and historical subjects. Born in Philadelphia, he trained there at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts under the history painter Peter F. Rothermel, and in Paris at the *École des Beaux-Arts* under the noted artist Alexandre Cabanel. Later he studied with Léon Bonnat, an enormously successful French portraitist. Heaton taught at the Pennsylvania Academy from 1868 to 1878, then returned to Paris until 1884. His later years were spent primarily in Washington, D.C.

The Recall of Columbus, which Heaton considered his greatest work, was begun in his Paris studio and finished in Rome in the studio of American sculptor Chauncey Ives. The painting was sent to the U.S. Capitol in 1884 for "examination" by the Joint Committee on the Library and purchased later that year for \$3,000 through the efforts of Committee Chairman, Senator John Sherman of Ohio. Heaton copyrighted *The Recall of Columbus* in 1891 as the 400th anniversary of Columbus's landing in the New World approached. The painting was exhibited at the Columbian Historical Exposition in Madrid in 1892, and the following year it was displayed at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. It soon became widely known when it was reproduced as one of 16 Columbus commemorative stamps issued in 1893 to coincide with the delayed opening of the Chicago exposition.

Although Heaton had confirmed visual details of the story by visiting the Columbus site in Granada and by making a careful study of period costume, his painting is a typical example of the idiosyncratic approach to historical subjects favored by American painters, an approach that valued moral lesson above stirring action. Like so many of his colleagues, Heaton chose—indeed sought out—a relatively static subject within Washington Irving's teeming and often dramatic narrative of Columbus's life and voyages.

Here, as a royal messenger intercepts the sailor with the startling but welcome news, there is no spurring in speed, no hastening with alacrity, not even a turning of the reins to be seen. Instead, every one of the six figures and five animals remain stock-still, gestures frozen. The only indication of a response to the letter in Columbus's hand is his

The Recall of Columbus

Augustus Goodyear Heaton (1844-1930)

Oil on canvas, 1882

51 x 91 inches (129.5 x 231.1 cm)

Signed and dated (lower right corner): copyright 1891 by / A. G. HEATON. / 1882.

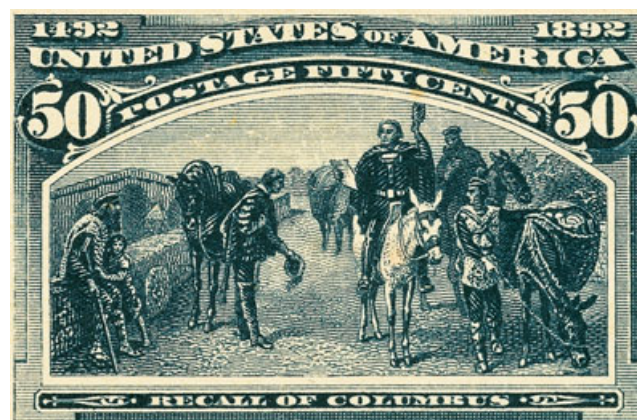
Purchased by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1884

Cat. no. 33.00007



dawning smile. The low, wide format with its strongly angled walls is the proscenium for this cast of historical actors. The scene itself, verified through the artist's study trip to Spain, is carefully portrayed. So is the mule pack bulging with maps, books, and a globe, which identifies the hero. His humble state and that of his son and their companion are underscored by their mules, which contrast with the fine steed of the queen's messenger. The crippled peasant and his daughter resting against the wall are the necessary witnesses to this selected moment of history. Heaton depicts the event as a motionless moment of moral triumph, an icon of genius vindicated.

At least 16 of Heaton's works are known to survive, although a monumental group portrait—*The Promoters of the New Congressional Library*—appears to have been lost. The artist wrote several books and published a literary newsletter, *The Nutshell*.



On January 2, 1893, the U.S. Post Office Department issued a 50-cent stamp illustrating *The Recall of Columbus* by Augustus Heaton as part of a postal series commemorating the navigator's discovery of America.