

MONUMENTAL: *John Henry at Ashland*
July 2019 – June 2020

J. Clark 10/18

Reasons for exhibiting this work:

We are recognizing home-grown talent. Henry Clay was a significant champion for Kentucky-made products and for demonstrating to the world that Lexington was a world-class city – the *Athens of the West*. John Henry was born in Lexington and is a graduate of UK's School of Fine Arts. He has been exhibited throughout the world and his art is in private and public collections in the U.S., Europe and Asia.

There is a long-standing tradition of art in the landscape and in the garden. From the Renaissance to the present day there have been different iterations of how art has been integrated into the landscape. The English "picturesque" style of the 18th and early 19th centuries employed several devices to structure and direct ones view of the landscape such as follies, water features and sculpted hedges.

It should be noted that the landscape of Ashland is not natural, it is a cultural expression. Clay was very deliberate in taking what was here and "sculpting" it into an English-like country manor by the importation of exotic and decorative trees and shrubs. The back lawn and the pastures around the house are all "framed" to create an inviting space designed for recreation and leisure. The "frame" was also an effective way to block the view of Clay's active farm.

The formal garden, added in 1950, is more obvious as a sculpted and "unnatural" intervention. It was designed, shaped and built much like a sculpture is. In many respects, the monumental works of John Henry create more of a dialogue between the art and the environment, whereas the walled-off garden creates a monologue independent of the estate – it is self-contained and seeks to provide a tranquil and calming space.

The works can be viewed as a metaphor for Clay's capacity to strike compromises. John Henry's work has been likened to giant pick-up sticks that were thrown into the air and then frozen in space. These works are all about creating a sense of balance and elegance with a brutal and unforgiving material – steel. I would say that these works are elegant because they don't necessarily reveal "how" they are put together. In some respects, this is akin to how Clay structured the Compromises for which he is most known.

Like these artworks the compromises required taking seemingly unbending political points-of-view and forging a deal; the public didn't see how the compromises were made nor were they aware of the deals which were struck behind closed doors. We only see the end result. To some, Clay's compromises may have appeared to be off-balance or even threatening; to others the compromises were a work of statesmanship or, if you will, art.

Lastly, like Clay's monument at Lexington cemetery, Clay looms over the landscape. He was a towering figure in American politics for half a century. So, these sculptures remind us of Clay's stature and prominence.