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## Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Figaro, 1873

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Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux  
French (1827-1875)  
*Figaro*, 1873  
Bronze  
22 in. (height)  
Museum Purchase, 96.3



ancy! Fancy! Double-buttoned breeches, embroidered waist coat over gathered cummerbund, a ribbon-edged chapeau, long hair braided and netted against bad hair days, and square-toed dress shoes make this bronze casting of Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's *Figaro* the envy of every bon vivant who ever lived during the 19th, 20th, or 21st centuries!

Carpeaux's style combines the vested elegance of noble sentiments, with an allusion to the piece's source, Beaumarchais' comic figure *The Barber of Seville*. Through the grandiloquent gesture of the figure the viewer hears echoes of a booming baritone, "Figaro Figaro Fi-ga-ro".

I love this animated tonsorial troubadour caught in the moment, confronting us with an impertinent but playful stance then pacifying us with his bashful glance! Even the fretless neck of the guitar strapped to his back stay in my memory's vision. We marvel at Carpeaux's detail: the fine engraving of the teeth, manicured fingernails, eyes with focused irises, sculptured cartilage of earlobes, individual strands of hair and the stretched neck tendons that let us hear the spoken words implied from his parted lips. What should we think of the figure's polite but teasing gesture?

The scattered accumulation of scholarly artifacts creates the static background against which the graceful figure bows. This contrast declares the figure's comfortable familiarity with upper class society: the open books with pages seemingly blowing in the winds of recent use, the globe symbolizing profound knowledge of great civilizations, and the guitar strapped to his back that promises lyrical tales of his worldly travels.

As I studied this piece at Marquette University's Haggerty Museum of Art, I tried to mimic the figure's pose. To get some assistance, I engaged a mother and father accompanying their student son through the collection during family weekend to help me answer a question. Is this figure right-handed or left-handed? The student, who also struck the tableaux pose of Figaro's pause answered, "He's right-handed!" However, I concluded that Figaro surely is ambidextrous, because in his right hand the fingers grip the quill (its tiny barbs separated unevenly) to suit the writing task he moves to accomplish; while the pointing finger suggests at least a shared preference for the left hand.

Given all these intriguing features of this clever *Figaro*, it is no wonder this special gift, donated by Catherine and David A. Straz, Jr., establishes such a memorable tribute to Dr. Curtis L. Carter, director of Marquette's Haggerty Museum of Art.

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