Primary Maker: John Rogers
Title: Checkers Up at the Farm
Date: 1875
Medium: Painted plaster
Dimensions: Overall: 11 1/4 in. × 20 in. × 17 1/4 in. (28.6 × 50.8 × 43.8 cm)
Credit Line: Gift of Samuel V. Hoffman
Object Number: 1928.29

Object Name: Genre sculpture
Classification: SCULPTURE

Curatorial Remarks:
Board games are a recurring theme in Rogers’ work, particularly the game of checkers. In 1855 he modeled a small clay group after the painting The Card Players by the English genre painter Sir David Wilkie. He reprised the theme a few years later, in 1859-60. He returned to the subject once again in 1875, and instead of creating a simple variation on a well-known English theme, he developed a much more sophisticated composition that addresses uniquely American class issues and demonstrates how much he had matured as an artist, both technically and intellectually, in the intervening years. Rogers’ 1859-60 Checker Players (1949.276, 1936.717) offers a simple vignette of two rural men, one old and one young, with the younger crowing over his anticipated victory. In this later version, the opponents are pointedly differentiated by class. Rogers’ sales catalogue described the two men as “a gentleman who has gone up to the farm with his wife and baby” and “the farmer, who has forced his opponent’s pieces into positions where they cannot be moved without being taken.” The older player is a well-to-do city dweller,
as can be seen by his suit, spats, and fashionable muttonchops. He stoops over the game board and holds a fan at his side, a feminine accessory that slightly compromises his masculinity. The young farmer across from him sits bolt upright, full of energy. He is clean-shaven and simply dressed in shirtsleeves and sturdy boots. He points out his winning position to the gentleman with a hearty laugh. Checkers Up at the Farm struck a chord with Americans; it was Rogers' most popular group next to Coming to the Parson, selling about five thousand plasters. Rogers included it in his contribution to the 1876 Centennial Exhibition; ever the canny marketer, he was no doubt aware that a subject embracing rural America would prove highly popular with the many millions who descended on Philadelphia's Fairmount Park from all parts of the country. Written responses to the group reflect its appeal to the general public. Critics relished telling the tale of the simple farmer besting the sophisticated urbanite with native unspoiled intelligence, describing the men's garb and behavior in detail. During this period class differences grew ever more marked, and populations were increasingly concentrated in cities. In addition, concerns were building about the effects of cloistered, sedentary, office life on the modern man's masculinity. Rogers' vignette offered an affirmation of native Yankee intelligence and the virtues of country life in the person of the clever, virile farmer.

Rogers' new 1875 composition is considerably more complex than the one he presented fifteen years before. The mastery of texture and detail, human anatomy and expression that he developed in the intervening years is remarkable. He also added two figures in the form of the city gentleman's wife and baby. The artist's wife, Hattie, posed as the attractive, well-dressed woman who watches the game with interest and holds their baby, who plays at trying to kick the checkers off the game board. At first glance they seem superfluous, but Rogers explained in his sales catalogue that they were on a family visit. Perhaps his intention was to soften his critique of class differences by making the urban man more sympathetic through his fatherly role. Though press notices rarely pointed it out, the city gentleman takes his defeat with an expression of good humor. His easy and benevolent acknowledgment of his country opponent's virtues allowed both urban and rural Americans to share the joke.

Physical Description:
Genre figure
Signed: Signed at front of base: "JOHN ROGERS / NEW YORK"
Markings: Inscribed at front of base: "CHECKERS / UP AT THE FARM"; inscribed at proper left rear of base: "PATENTED / DECEMBER 28 1875"
Related Objects: