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exhibition review of

Bessie Potter Vonnoh: Sculptor of Women

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Bessie Potter Vonnoh: Sculptor of Women

Florence Griswold Museum, Old Lyme, Connecticut
October 11, 2008-January 11, 2009

Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama
February 7-May 10, 2009

Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, Ohio
June 6-September 6, 2009

It would be useless and unprofitable to compare Mrs. Vonnoh with other American sculptors, because her work occupies its own special and well-defined place, just as the works of Partridge, Saint-Gaudens, French, Barnard and MacMonnies have their own respective characteristics sharply drawn and accentuated. In her own field—the field of the statuette—Mrs. Vonnoh has no superiors in this country.

--Anon., "A Sculptor of Statuettes," *Current Literature* 34 (June 1903), 701.

This past year saw the first touring exhibition of work by one of the most esteemed sculptors of turn-of-the-century America, Bessie Potter Vonnoh (1872-1955). Developed by Julie Aronson, Curator of American Painting and Sculpture at the Cincinnati Art Museum (CAM), it is also the first solo display of the artist's work since 1930. Vonnoh produced domestically scaled bronzes and garden statuary depicting women and children. Her Impressionistically modeled works won numerous accolades, including election to the National Academy of Design, the National Sculpture Society, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1904 Vonnoh won the gold medal for sculpture at the St. Louis World's Fair. The exhibition featured thirty-two sculptures from 1895 to 1930, and two oil portraits of the artist by Vonnoh's successful painter-husband, Robert Vonnoh (1858-1933). These are drawn from three private collections and twenty museum collections, most of the latter acquired during Vonnoh's lifetime.

The Cincinnati Art Museum received sponsorship from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Henry Luce Foundation, Frisch's Big Boy Restaurants, Macy's Inc., and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. Such prestigious support is notable, especially given the relative paucity of similar exhibitions and publications. Aside from the current show on Augustus St. Gaudens at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a small display by Abastenia St. Leger Eberle in Iowa a few years back, and a more recent one about women sculptors of the Cornish colony in New Hampshire, very few museums have promoted exhibitions of American sculpture in general, and those concerning a solo female sculptor in particular. This exhibition opened at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut, where Vonnoh lived and was part of the artist's colony for over fifty years, then travelled to the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Alabama before coming to Ohio.

The spare, gracious installation at the Cincinnati Art Museum, divided into three sections, was an engaging celebration of Vonnoh's remarkable work. The first and last sections were small, each featuring a painting of Vonnoh on a freestanding wall divider. The bulk of the sculpture appeared in the large middle area—Special Exhibitions Gallery 234—a long, narrow room with

a high ceiling. To make it appear more intimate, exhibition developers hung sixteen gauzy yellow-straw scrims, three each at the beginning and end, and ten in the center. Gently waving, these suggested a summery air, along with the yellow-green dividers. The display was somewhat evocative of a garden setting. The introductory labels, applied in a rusty red-brown sans serif font on a slightly brighter green background, were challenging to read given the close saturation of the hues, as were the six Vonnoh quotations about art on the beige side walls (three on each side) in sage green. One might overlook them altogether as nothing else appeared on the periphery of the installation. Dates and sources for the citations were not given. Case labels, in white on brownish eggplant, provided deeper contrast and were more legible. The twenty freestanding, waist-high pedestals with creamy beige tops introduced a rough note, encased in thin, rusted Cor-Ten steel. Although the raw industrial material seemed rather out of place given the refinement of the bronzes, the enclosures introduced more texture and were not obtrusive with their dark coloring. About half were surmounted by plexiglass cases. The vitrines protected the smallest sculptures.

In the center of the first area there was just one sculpture, a fifteen-inch bust called *A Modern Madonna*, 1904; this piece was also reproduced on the cover of the exhibition catalogue (fig. 1). The work depicts Vonnoh's painter friend, Helen Savier DuMond (1872-1968), tenderly holding her baby, Joseph, in a half-length, pyramidal composition formed by voluminous, flowing draperies. This set the stage for one of the main themes of the exhibition, domestic scenes of women and children. The introductory didactic text, on the wall divider behind the piece, described Vonnoh's success at negotiating a male-dominated field during the Gilded Age and during the time of the "New Woman" in the early twentieth century. Herself childless, she depicted "...the most cherished aspects of American experience: contented mothers, innocent children, and young women at leisure." Vonnoh made her high quality, natural and elegant sculpture available to a wide audience. Ironically, she "...supported society's conventional notions of women as icons of beauty and the moral guardians of the home." Next to this introduction was Robert Vonnoh's *Portrait of Bessie Potter Vonnoh*, 1907, his painting of his wife at work, sculpting tools in hand, next to her sculpture of *Julia Marlowe as Juliet*, ca.1907 (the original not in the exhibition, but rather the first version, ca. 1894) with *Motherhood*, modeled 1902; cast 1912. This is a double portrait; Robert appears painting the scene in a mirrored reflection in the background, along with another, unidentified sculpture by Bessie.



Fig. 1, Entrance to "Bessie Potter Vonnoh: Sculptor of Women" exhibition at the Cincinnati Art Museum, June 6-Sept. 6, 2009. The sculpture is *A Modern Madonna*, 1904. The painting is Robert Vonnoh's *Portrait of Bessie Potter Vonnoh*, 1907. [\[larger image\]](#)

Opposite the wall divider were two brown painted cases (fig. 2). On the left, under glass, was a collection of ephemera; five of the items were from the Mary R. Schiff Library and Archives at the Cincinnati Art Museum. The sixth object was a family album from a private collection, opened to show black-and-white square snapshots of the Vonnohs at home on Rockland Lake, New York on Long Island. They lived there until 1903 when they moved to Manhattan. On the left, Robert feeds pigeons. On the facing page, Vonnoh sits contemplatively outdoors in a wooden chair. Flanked by the album are paper memorabilia. Included are Vonnoh's entry form to the 11th Annual Exhibition of American Art at the Cincinnati Art Museum (1904), a letter from her to CAM Director Joseph H. Gest (October 8, 1904) about the pieces she was submitting, two brochures listing a joint exhibition by the Vonnohs at the Montross Gallery in New York (1913), and a calling card that Vonnoh sent to Gest inviting him to that show. One of the slim brochures is displayed open and prone so that viewers can see the list of thirty-seven sculptures on the back cover that Vonnoh exhibited. Between 1904 and 1914 Vonnoh participated in seven of the yearly invitational exhibitions of American painting and sculpture at the CAM. The prices she listed for her work ranged between \$40 and \$150. The museum purchased two bronzes, *A Study* (\$50), modeled ca. 1898; cast ca. 1903, a study for *A Young Mother*, and *Hester* (\$60), modeled 1901; cast 1901-03, a bust of a young girl sporting a large bow on her bobbed hair.



Fig. 2, First section of the exhibition, featuring archival materials on the left. On the right is an instructional DVD about lost-wax casting and an educational display about the deterioration of bronze via chemical application. [\[larger image\]](#)

Atop the case on the right was a screen projecting a silent, captioned DVD about the lost-wax technique, lent by the Victoria & Albert Museum. Beside this were two rows of three pieces of bronze with the label, "Please touch." Three uncolored squares in various textures were above three patinated squares, colored by the use of three different chemical reactions. Upon witnessing the debilitating effects of human oils and dirt on these bronzes, visitors could understand why they should not touch art objects in a museum.

In the large central section are fourteen pedestals, four in the middle, and five on either side (figs. 3 and 4). The support stands, some square, some rectangular, are staggered to encourage traffic flow around the sculptures, which are meant to be viewed from all sides. The installation is clever. Rather than have all works facing toward the exhibition entrance, they are strategically mounted to accommodate the movement of the viewer. One can stand in the middle of four cases, for instance, and rotate in place to see the front of all pieces. The pedestal

displaying the bust, *Hester*, faces one way while the pedestal supporting *Bust of a Baby*, looks in the opposite direction so that visitors must circumnavigate to study both (fig. 5). The works are further arranged in a somewhat chronological fashion, from ca. 1895 to 1923. Most of Vonnoh's earliest works, largely plaster, are no longer extant.



Fig. 3, Central installation section of Bessie Potter Vonnoh sculptures at the Cincinnati Art Museum. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 4, In the foreground is *Enthroned*, modeled 1902; cast 1906. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 5, In the foreground are *Hester*, modeled 1901; cast 1901-03 (facing forward) and *Bust of a Baby*, modeled 1901; cast 1901-04 (facing rear). [\[larger image\]](#)

This area of the exhibition is flanked by the wall dividers. On the first is a circular bronze bas-relief of Robert Vonnoh in the original square oak frame, ca. 1901. Given the sensitive and expert handling of the form, it is surprising that Vonnoh made very few bas-reliefs. To the right of this is a photograph of the diminutive Vonnoh (only 4' 8") dancing the quadrille with her friends, ca. 1907-10. This is good counterpoint to the sculpture just in front of it, *Girl Dancing*, modeled 1897; cast 1906. Unlike most sculptures of dancing figures, the piece is neither a portrait of a professional dancer nor a representation of a mythological dancer. Most likely, it represents a woman bowing to an unseen male partner during a quadrille, a popular dance throughout the nineteenth century.

Next to the photograph of Vonnoh dancing, another wall label poses the question: "Why do the three bronze castings of *A Young Mother* on display to your right look different from one another?" The answers given are the "...variables that impact the final appearance of a bronze casting technique;" artist's changes in the wax; chasing; patina; and plaster model. This is one of the most effective pedagogical sections of the show. On a nearby open pedestal, one can clearly see distinctions between the media (the single sand-casting represented in the exhibition and two lost-wax castings, no. 6 and no. 25) and the subtle changes the artist made between three versions of the same work (fig. 6). The third sculpture has a black brown patina over a warm red brown and areas of green. It was Vonnoh's last diploma piece. A small photograph of the clay model, destroyed in the casting process, appears on the case label. *A Young Mother*, depicting a seated woman tenderly cradling her baby, was one of Vonnoh's most popular works. It won four awards and by 1930, nine museums had purchased bronzes.



Fig. 6, Three versions of *A Young Mother*, modeled 1896: sand cast, 1899; lost-wax cast, 1906; lost-wax cast, before 1921. [\[larger image\]](#)

On the back wall divider is a brief biography of Vonnoh, listing chronological highlights in thirteen of the years between her birth in 1872 and her death in 1955. Here is the other portrait by Robert Vonnoh depicting his wife in 1915 in the guise of famed artist, Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun. It is a half-length oval painting with the smiling sitter wearing a large white collar and head wrap. Beside it is a small reproduction of that artist's self-portrait, 1790, from the Galleria Uffizi in Florence.

Two display cases offer additional opportunities for comparison. In one, there are four small pieces, two of which are terra-cotta statuettes, *The Fan*, 1909 or 1910 (in white bisque, or a

standing woman holding a large, open fan at her right side) and *Young Woman Reading*, ca. 1910 (fig. 7). The other two sculptures are the bronze *Daphne*, 1910 or 1911, and another version of *The Fan*, in silvered bronze. In a nearby case are three works, *Feeding the Pigeons*, ca. 1920, a portrait of a friend's daughter which Vonnoh completed on commission, and two versions of *Good Night* (or *On the Sandman's Trail*), modeled 1909 or 1910; cast by 1915. One of the sleepy little girls (modeled after the daughter of sculptor Alexander Phimister Proctor) in a long nightgown is warm pinky beige terracotta and the other is bronze. Viewers can contrast the different effects of the matte, pebbly texture and muted color of the clothing in one with the more elegant, smooth, metallic areas of skin and jagged drapery edges in the other. *Good Night* was one of Vonnoh's most popular works; she produced more than fifty casts of it. Collectors appreciated its charm and could more readily afford to purchase a bronze that was less expensive because of its small size (only 9 ½ inches tall). *Girl Dancing*, modeled 1897; cast 1906, was also in high demand, and Vonnoh sold over forty casts of it.



Fig. 7, *The Fan*, 1909 in silvered bronze (left; casting date not given) and terra-cotta (right), *Young Woman Reading* (title unknown), ca. 1910 (terra-cotta), and *Daphne*, modeled 1910 or 1911; cast 1915 (bronze on original wood base). On the wall divider is Robert Vonnoh's painting, *Bessie Potter Vonnoh*, 1915. [\[larger image\]](#)

Vonnoh's subjects were largely middle- and upper-class white women and children, although curator Aronson argues that she did not intentionally choose her subjects along class lines. One of the few exceptions was the explicitly lower class, *Italian Mother*, (modeled 1907; casting date not given), a small bust of a woman in a kerchief and fringed shawl tightly cradling her baby. Vonnoh created the work while recuperating in Italy. Critics often compared and contrasted Vonnoh's sculpture with that of Abastenia St. Leger Eberle (1878-1942), who frequently depicted the New York urban poor. They saw Vonnoh's work as conveying dignity and conviction while Eberle's demonstrated vivacity and modernity.

In the final section of the exhibition are five pedestals of garden statuary, none enclosed by plexiglass (fig. 8). The central piece, and also the largest is a life size woodland nymph called *Garden Figure* (or *Bird-Bath*), 1928. The installation is balanced by surrounding pieces. On diagonally opposite ends are works of single figures, *Water Lilies*, 1913 and cast 1917; and *Standing Nude*, ca. 1920. Between these are group sculptures, *In Arcadia*, 1925-26 (of a boy and girl), and *Allegresse* (a trio of female dancers), modeled 1920, probably cast 1930. Vonnoh's earliest garden statue, *Water Lilies*, of a nude girl atop a rock with outstretched arms holding a lily in one hand, won the National Arts Club Prize at the 1920 exhibition of the National

Association of Women Painters and Sculptors. In the 1920s, more than twenty-three castings were made, the majority by Roman Bronze Works.



Fig. 8, View into garden statuary section of the exhibition. On the left is the rear of *Garden Figure (or Bird-Bath Fountain)*, modeled 1928; cast 1930. On the right is *Water Lilies*, modeled 1913; cast 1917. [\[larger image\]](#)

On the wall divider are framed photographs, ca. 1930, one from the CAM, and two from a private collection (fig. 9). Two of these photographs feature models of Vonnoh's sculptures (neither in the exhibition), one *Sea Sprite* and the other *April Showers*. The label for *Sea Sprite* includes two small photographic reproductions (ca. 1928, Archives of American Art) of Vonnoh posing the nude child who modeled for this work. The young model was Beverly Maynard, daughter of the Richard Maynard, a family friend and the photographer of this image. Next is an original gelatin silver print by Maynard of Vonnoh, ca. 1930. The middle-aged sculptor looks directly, but shyly at the lens, the fingers of her outstretched hand tentatively stroking the left underside of her jaw. A longer wall label concerns garden statuary of male-and-female figures, featuring two works by Vonnoh, the *Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bird Fountain*, 1923-27, in Oyster Bay, Long Island, New York (including a photographic reproduction) and the *Frances Hodgson Burnett Memorial*, 1926-1937 in Central Park, New York. The latter depicts a standing female figure and a reclining piping Pan. To raise money for the casting, the Burnett Memorial Committee sold six castings of the nymph individually. The *Garden Figure*, that very nymph, on display alone is a tour-de-force, with its nearly invisible wisp of clinging drapery. The gallery lighting attempts to duplicate an outdoor setting although it cannot capture the reflected light from the water-filled basin in the original Conservatory Garden in Central Park. Just as there, though, "...the downcast face of the girl is deeply shaded and made more mysterious by the barely defined eyes" (201).



Fig. 9, From left to right: *In Arcadia*, modeled 1925 or 1926; cast 1929; *Garden Figure (or Bird-Bath Fountain)*, modeled 1928; cast 1930; *Allegresse*, modeled 1920; probably cast 1930. [\[larger image\]](#)

Vonnoh's oeuvre was well represented in this exhibition, save for a few omissions. There are no plasters because most of her early work is not extant, and one surviving piece is too fragile to travel. There were no marbles or gilded bronzes as these were not available for loans. And there was just one portrait of a man, the bas-relief of Vonnoh's husband. The sculptor created additional likenesses of men (some now missing), such as David Swing, 1894; James Schoolcraft Sherman, 1909-11; Edward Winslow Hall, 1916; Edward Keyes, 1931; Frank Chapman, 193; and others, but the focus of this display, as stated in the title, was on women.

This show was complemented by a small exhibition, also curated by Aronson, on the interior balcony just outside Gallery 234. *Virgins to Vixens: Picturing American Women, 1880-1930* featured rarely seen works from the Cincinnati Art Museum's stunning collection of some 30,000 works on paper. As Aronson wrote on the introductory label, "Illustrators for the popular media found women's new activities fresh and compelling subjects. In the early twentieth century some artists who aimed to capture the spirit of modern city life delighted in new themes." The images depicted women at work and at leisure, as mothers, consumers, and studio models. These were five photographs, seventeen prints, and five drawings, as well as a technically exquisite little bronze, *Allegra (Solo Dancer)*, modeled 1929, cast between 1929 and 1964, by Harriet Whitney Frishmuth (1880-1980), whom Vonnoh knew via their mutual participation in the National Sculpture Society. Also included were pieces by James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Mary Cassatt, Elizabeth Nourse, Robert Blum, Edward Hopper, James Van Der Zee, Doris Ulmann, George Bellows, Charles Dana Gibson, John Sloan, Reginald Marsh, and others. Whistler's work was of special significance to Vonnoh. His 1894 transfer crayon lithograph, *La Robe Rouge (The Red Dress)*, was among the inspirations for her *Day Dreams*, modeled 1898; cast 1907. Also of particular interest is Arnold Genthe's gelatin silver print of Irma Duncan dancing, ca. 1915-1916. The model (who took the surname of her beloved mentor) was a follower of famed dancer Isadora Duncan (1878-1927), who performed in Greek dress. Aronson makes the connection between the popularity of the internationally acclaimed Duncan and Vonnoh's *The Scarf* and *The Dance*, both depicting women in a generalized version of the Ionic chiton.

As in the Vonnoh exhibition, labels are well written and informative. The only rather unclear, contradictory text concerns a photograph of an African American woman by James Van Der

Zee, Lady at Goldfish Bowl, 1923: "The romantic soft focus, hand coloring, and the added butterfly identify this woman as belonging to a separate feminine world—a world that United States history had forbidden African American women to enter." Below the caption is a small reproduction of a painting by Childe Hassam, *The Goldfish Window*, 1916, without explanation. Other notable images in this supplementary exhibition are four color posters, three of which are by the Strobridge Company from Cincinnati. These vivid lithographic advertisements all feature attractive women. Most delightful are those for the musical satire, "The Sultan of Sulu," 1902, depicting a female educator in an academic robe, and a poster for "Famous Beauties in Intricate Bicycle Feats: The 8 Kaufman Girls."

Together, these two exhibitions presented a rare treat. Aronson successfully resurrected the career of a quite notable, award-winning female American sculptor and placed her in some of the social and political contexts of middle-class women in the United States at the turn of the century. The in-depth focus on Vonnoh allowed viewers to witness firsthand the high quality, originality, and breadth of her impressionistically modeled small bronzes and garden statuary in the first solo display of her work in almost eighty years. This show toured the country (or at least, the East, Midwest, and South), garnered nationally esteemed financial support, and was accompanied by a stunning catalogue. Hopefully, this impressive package will serve as an impetus and model for future exhibitions of historical work by other singular female artists and American sculptors. Certainly, it will enhance the appreciation and market for such (relatively affordable) art.

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Illustrations

All photographs by Rob Deslongchamp.



Fig. 1, Entrance to "Bessie Potter Vonnoh: Sculptor of Women" exhibition at the Cincinnati Art Museum, June 6-Sept. 6, 2009. The sculpture is *A Modern Madonna*, 1904. The painting is Robert Vonnoh's *Portrait of Bessie Potter Vonnoh*, 1907. [\[return to text\]](#)



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