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book review of

A Sisterhood of Sculptors, American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome by Melissa Dabakis

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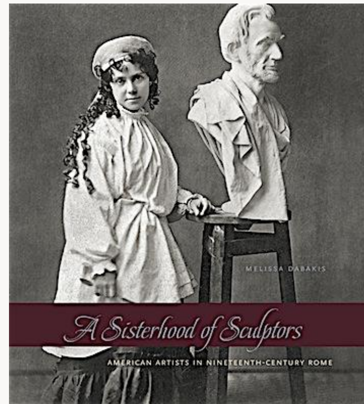

Melissa Dabakis,
A Sisterhood of Sculptors, American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome.
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This long awaited book provides a compelling account of the lives and professional careers of an audacious community of American women sculptors, who lived and worked in Rome from ca. 1850 to 1876. This group, which included Harriet Hosmer, Edmonia Lewis, Anne Whitney, and Vinnie Ream, hailed from diverse social and economic backgrounds and spanned a generation. By living successful, independent lives far from home, they challenged two millennia of accumulated social traditions, medical beliefs, and religious dogma. It was a time when every bastion of authority affirmed a universal distrust of female creativity and denied women the privilege of artistic genius. But despite the odds against them, these women attained international renown as professional sculptors. How did they do it? That is the broad question this excellent book addresses with authority and sensitivity.

A Sisterhood of Sculptors defies methodological categorization. It ranges over several fields, most obviously art history, feminist theory, cultural geography, and postcolonial studies, in its presentation of the lives and works of female artists as inseparable from the powerful forces that both formed and confined them. The book's brief introduction frames its discourse by introducing several questions. How did American artists, working from abroad, negotiate the politics of rebellion, gender, and race during these volatile years? What personal strategies did they adopt to present themselves as respectable professionals at a time in which subservience and domestic virtue were deemed essential to the performance of ideal womanhood? What impact did the question of women's suffrage exert on their lives and careers? How did these bold women work within the dominant neoclassical style, competing for and winning public commissions for serious, large-scale pieces in marble? Why Italy, and why Rome in particular?

The book provides a nuanced explanation of the gendered nature of creativity and expatriation during the mid-nineteenth century. Eschewing traditional art historical formulas, its narrative follows a roughly historical sequence linked to specific ideas and arguments. Part 1, "Feminine Professionalism in Boston and Rome," which includes three chapters, describes the conditions under which American women trained as neoclassical sculptors in Boston, before leaving to negotiate the gendered terrain of artistic production in Rome. The next two chapters comprise Part II, "Women Sculptors and the Politics of Rome." This section addresses American responses to the Italian Risorgimento (creation of a unified Italian nation), and clarifies the ideological relationship between Roman liberation and the Anglo/American notion of Italy as a feminine utopia. Chapters 6 and 7 comprise a section titled "The Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Suffrage Debates." It draws parallels among Italian liberation, slavery, and suffrage, serious issues that American women sculptors consciously addressed in their work. Letters, published critiques, and writings by members of the expatriate community in Rome (Henry James, Robert Browning, Nathanial Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, and many others) add color to the experiences of these artists as they sought to construct unique, individual identities as Americans, sculptors, and women.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 ("The Boston-Rome Nexus," "Neoclassicism in Cosmopolitan Rome," and "A Woman Artist Is an Object of Peculiar Odium") provide essential background for the understanding of the neoclassical style and the place of female artists within it. Chapter 1 begins with the young Harriet Hosmer's arrival in Rome in 1852, and backtracks to her formative years in a Boston suburb. New England offered many opportunities for the young Hosmer to pursue her dreams of freedom and independence. The liberal Boston Athenaeum famously allowed aspiring female artists access to plaster casts. However, women were barred from life drawing, which was considered offensive to tender virginal sensibilities. It was Hosmer's father, a freethinking physician, who taught her the rudimentary anatomical skills, which served her so well in her sculptural representations of the human body. Hosmer devoured the writings of abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, and absorbed the strategies for feminine behavior presented in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. She also was familiar with the radical theories of Margaret Fuller, who wrote that the realm of ideas in Greek mythology was superior to Christian mores, and equated the lives of women to slavery. Such ideas supported the primacy of neoclassical ideals while undercutting the essential subservience of women in the ruling patriarchy. The various means by which Hosmer and her sister sculptors negotiated these two poles in their personal and professional lives is a dominant theme in the following pages.

Once she arrived in Rome, Hosmer experienced freedom from societal strictures, and intellectual tolerance beyond the experience of her Boston girlhood. An established cosmopolitan community of foreign female intellectuals, who earned public legitimacy within a male dominated world, had paved the way. The important neoclassical painter Angelika Kauffmann occupied a studio atop the Spanish Steps. Germaine ("Madame") de Staël, a fixture of the expatriate literary movement, had already introduced a revolutionary paragon of feminine liberation in her famous novel *Corinne*. To Americans, Italy was mythic, a land of ritual and culture—the ultimate "other," where one could live a privileged life above and apart from the fray. Hosmer was immediately taken under the wing of the famed thespian Harriet Cushman and her companion Matilda Hays. Cushman was the avowed muse and matriarch of the Anglo-American community of women in Rome until her departure from the city in 1870.

Though the fraught term "lesbian" is never mentioned in relation to this, or any other female relationship discussed in this book, Cushman and Hays lived openly as same-sex partners. Their household was, in every other way, a model of elite domesticity, fostering an ambiance of "feminine" refinement, erudition, and creativity. It was in this circle that Hosmer learned to wield the subversive trope of domesticity as a feminist strategy, a leitmotif that reappears throughout the book. She inhabited the persona of a precocious "child-woman," noted for her disarming manners, dimples, and rosy cheeks. It was, in fact, a façade contrived to mitigate the threat that female artists posed to male dominance.

As disarming innocents, it was easier for women to mobilize the lofty language of Neoclassicism to feminist purposes. They fashioned public identities in their private studios, which served as creative environments, commercial centers, and tourist attractions. Many visitors to Rome noted the adventurous lifestyles and mannish working habits of these women, who roamed the streets unchaperoned, and dared to wield authority over male assistants. The challenge was to maintain the appearance of propriety at all costs, for even the faintest whisper of scandal could lead to ruin. The case of the sculptor Louisa Lander, who was vilified and driven out of Rome when rumors of a dalliance with a man surfaced, is an example. Among the many strengths of this book is its interpretation of specific works within the contexts of the limitations placed on women, the courage required to surmount them, and the high price of transgression. Hosmer's *Medusa* (1854), *Oenone* (1854–55), and *Zenobia in Chains* (1861), and Louisa Lander's now lost *Virginia Dare* (1859–60) receive especially perceptive analyses in these chapters.

Chapters 4 and 5 ("Rome in the Colonial Imagination" and "Imagining Italy") situate Italy within the Anglo/American collective consciousness as a picturesque arcadia, home to colorful peasants and exotic Catholic rituals. American tourists flocked to Rome after the Civil War, as travel restrictions lifted and postwar wealth increased. These visitors experienced the advantages of innate superiority over a vulnerable native population, the legacy of Manifest Destiny. Italian culture viewed women travelers positively, as emissaries of a modern republic with seeds in ancient imperial Rome. Within this brief window of time, expatriate women enjoyed unparalleled freedom within Italian culture. There were no proscriptions against studying from live models, and life was easy and cheap. Expatriates enjoyed the advantages of their Anglo-Saxon origin and elite social status, which they leveraged to their advantage in a colonized Rome.

These chapters provide a detailed account of the Risorgimento, the movement to liberate the Italian peninsula from foreign control and unify the land as a sovereign nation-state. This secular vision for Italy promised individual liberties without Papal intervention. Most Americans, who tended to be virulently anti-Catholic, sympathized with the movement. Many of the works produced by the American sisterhood of sculptors during this time, such as Hosmer's *Beatrice Cenci* (1856) and Anne Whitney's *Roma* (1868), communicated support for the Italian nationalist cause, which Americans associated with progress and modernity. Though Italy became a sovereign country in 1860, the Pope retained control of Rome for some years. The city's expatriate sculptors searched for a visual language that articulated the goal of female empowerment, while also demonizing the Pope and supporting the liberation movement. Hosmer chose the subjects of *Zenobia in Chains*, *Beatrice Cenci*, and *Medusa* for their mythic displays of womanly modesty, manly valor, and intellectual leanings, qualities for which they

paid dearly. After 1870, Rome, now the capital of a nation, began to lose allure for Americans. Ironically, as Italy flourished, the freedoms of colonial privilege, which allowed expatriate women to flourish, evaporated. The shining moment was gone, and the sisterhood of sculptors was left to remake their destinies back home in America.

Chapters 6 and 7 ("Antislavery Sermons in Stone," and "Women Sculptors, Suffrage, and the Public Stage") draw parallels between feminism and abolitionism as common causes. When Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, arrived in Rome in 1857, both American abolitionists and Italian nationalists feted her as a heroine. Edmonia Lewis, a young sculptor of mixed race, was attracted by Rome's prominent African American residents and was soon embraced by the creative women in Cushman's circle. Lewis traded on her mixed African and Ojibwa heritage throughout her career, though some critics belittled and tolerated her efforts as the work of "a colored girl." The political meaning of her sculptures was not ignored, however. This book's analyses of critical responses to Lewis's *Forever Free* and *Cleopatra* (as well as Anne Whitney's *Ethiopia Shall Soon Stretch Out Her Hands to God, or Africa*) demarcate the tensions inherent in representing black Africans in white marble, a medium inextricably associated with Caucasian European imperialism. The scientific chain of being, which Darwin eventually discredited, embraced specific intellectual and moral qualities inherent in distinct physiognomies of race and gender. This paradigm accepted Caucasian males as the undisputed, anointed leaders of the world, and black women as closest, among all human types, to animals. In her life and work, Lewis privileged herself as one of the downtrodden and masked the audacity of her subjects behind the familiar cloak of Yankee family values. While paying lip service to the self-sacrifice and submission associated with "true womanhood" in her life, she brazenly challenged gender and racial stereotypes in her work.

The final chapter chronicles the apogee of the sisterhood of sculptors, culminating in their winning of major public commissions after the Civil War. The career of Vinnie Ream was a phenomenon born of this extraordinary, yet fragile, moment. When she was given the commission for the standing portrait of Abraham Lincoln for the United States Capitol Rotunda, the public gasped. "Could it be? What was the crowning of Corinne at Rome compared with this triumph of an American girl in the capital of the country?," wondered a reporter for the *Washington Evening Star* (181). Critics hailed Ream as a "genius," a term previously applied only to the titans of patriarchal art history. She was a new kind of public woman—self-made, independent, and commercially successful. Early in her life, Ream adopted the pose of precocious child-woman, as Hosmer had done. But later, she consciously took advantage of her physical appeal and charisma. She chose to exaggerate her womanliness, which had the effect of concealing her professional ambition and towering achievements. But this pose did not sit well with feminist notions of seriousness and dedication to the cause. Suffragettes resented her, and, indeed, Ream was famously uninterested in the burning questions posed by the Seneca Falls convention of 1848. She remained focused on her own career, allowing her work to fuel public debates about nationalism, equal rights and slavery.

"The world never forgets the woman in the artist," wrote Ream in 1871 (197). Even she was forced to concede that two thousand years of scientific and religious dogma could not be overturned in a generation. The visions of the sisterhood of sculptors were testament to the struggle, promise, and ultimately dashed hopes of this unique movement. Ratification of the 15th constitutional amendment in 1870, and the end of Reconstruction in 1876, asserted the

equality of American black men. But the rights of women were ignored, allowing them to sink into artistic and political invisibility. Suffrage would wait another fifty years to be achieved. The cultivated mid-century historical moment, which nourished the sisterhood's successes, was replaced by a dogmatically conservative and mean spirited misogyny, which typified the fin de siècle worldwide. The book's powerful "Epilogue" makes the important parallel between Vinnie Ream's career and the rise and fall of the women's rights movement. The final illustration is a poignant photo of Ream in 1878, posing confidently in her wedding gown, her famous Farragut monument a shadowy presence in the background. This would be her last major sculptural work. Ream's genius was eventually overwhelmed by the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood demanded of "true womanhood."

This serious study of expatriate women artists in Rome has been a long time coming. *A Sisterhood of Sculptors* is articulate, thorough, and engrossing in its examination of the personal challenges and political pressures these artists met and overcame. Every book has its lacunae, however, and no one volume can do everything. To this reader, a more integrated contextualization of these artists' lives and works within the history of women would be welcome. By the nineteenth century, the inferiority of women was more than a popular perception. It was a paradigm of long standing. Patriarchal authorities mobilized the power of both science and religion in their attempts to discourage women from seeking equality, for their own good, of course. The uniquely female diseases of hysteria, chlorosis, and neurasthenia were commonly diagnosed in the nineteenth century. They were but incarnations of age-old beliefs in the vulnerability of the female body, resurrected as a defense against women's demands for equal rights and intellectual agency. Science further held that the delicate female reproductive system was easily irritated by "unfeminine" behavior, including remaining celibate, wearing shirts and pants, working for money, and even cutting the hair. The artists profiled in this book were guilty of all these infractions to some extent. By choosing to live in freedom, they courted ill health, infertility, and even untimely death. A woman who purposefully flaunted doctors' orders, as members of the "sisterhood" did, was living dangerously.

The terms "true woman" and "true womanhood" appear throughout the book. However, in the nineteenth century, these words evoked much more than a coupling of adjective and noun. Though several feminist strategies emerged in the nineteenth century, the "cult of true womanhood" was more or less institutionalized among the white, Protestant upper and middle classes in Great Britain and the United States. Within this system, "true women" possessed the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness above all. Women were instructed to find their destinies within the domains of home and family where their natural talents as wives and mothers could be fulfilled. The sculptors who inhabit the pages of this book adopted several strategies in their confrontation with the cult of true womanhood. But their tactics, such as the public appearance of sexual purity, did not spring from the head of Zeus. The nineteenth-century definition of womanhood was inherited from centuries of theory and practice. An example is the first professional female artist, Sofonisba Anguisuola (ca. 1532–1625), who, in an effort to neutralize her gender, signed her works "Sofonisba virgo." How satisfying it would be to admire the guts and glory of the American "sisterhood of sculptors" within the context of the ancient, institutionalized traditions of misogyny, from which nineteenth-century attitudes evolved. Doubtless future scholars will address such topics further, inspired by the excellent groundwork provided by this intelligent and articulate book.

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