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book review of

Bessie Potter Vonnoh: Sculptor of Women by Julie Aronson, with an essay by Janis Conner

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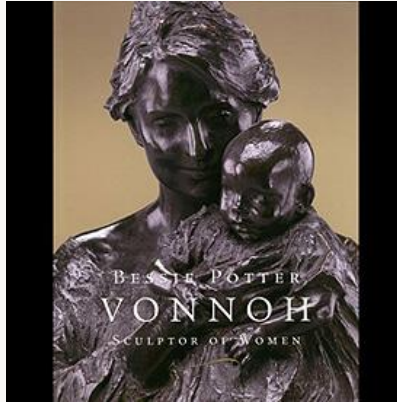
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Bessie Potter Vonnoh: Sculptor of Women Julie Aronson, with an essay by Janis Conner Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008 287 pp.; 89 b/w illustrations, 49 color illustrations; bibliography; index \$60 (cloth); \$39.95 (paperback) ISBN: 978-0-8214-1800-0 (hc: alk. paper); 978-0-8214-1901-7 (pb: alk. paper)

The work of Bessie Potter...is of the first order of merit, and yet of such a nature as to be in place only in the home. It is too delicate to relate to the private phases and emotions of the home life to appear beautiful anywhere outside the home.

--Theodore Dreiser, "Frank Edwin Elwell, Sculptor,"
New York Times, 4 December 1898

The recent exhibition of Bessie Potter Vonnoh's work at the Cincinnati Art Museum was accompanied by a beautiful, copiously illustrated catalogue, the first exclusively devoted to the artist's sculpture. Julie Aronson is the primary author of this pioneering study, based on her 1995 dissertation at the University of Delaware. She thoroughly explores Vonnoh's work, analyzing its origins, critical reception, sources, and patronage, and she corrects numerous factual inaccuracies of earlier publications. Janis Conner, a partner in the New York City gallery, Conner · Rosenkranz, contributed an essay on Vonnoh's early bronzes and founders. Although a cache of previously unknown Vonnoh journals, photographs, correspondence, and assorted ephemera came to light in a private collection (which will shortly join the body of the artist's papers already at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art) just as the manuscript was off to the printer, this publication will be the definitive study of Vonnoh for a long time to come. It is a highly impressive work of scholarship, born of years of meticulous research, and written in sophisticated, yet accessible prose. Aronson's eye for sculpture and descriptive but succinct writing style, combined with the chic design, make the exhibition catalogue a real page-turner. Aronson is also a generous author who liberally thanks those who helped her, both in her three pages of acknowledgments and in the extensive footnotes. The volume opens with a brief preface by Aaron Betsky, Director of the Cincinnati Art Museum (CAM), who notes that the museum first purchased two of Vonnoh's bronzes in 1904; the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York followed suit in 1906. The CAM was second only to Vonnoh's alma mater, the Art Institute of Chicago, in its acquisition of her work.

Throughout the book, Aronson clearly articulates what distinguishes Vonnoh's oeuvre, often ascribed to Beaux-Arts naturalism or the so-called Genteel Tradition, from that of past artists and from her contemporaries. In her introduction, she states that Vonnoh "was recognized as the first in the nation to render such everyday themes [of American women and children] in sculpture and was thought to have brought to them her own exquisitely sensitive approach" (2). Although Vonnoh's statuettes appeared conservative in comparison to the avant-garde sculpture on view at the 1913 Armory Show, American sculptors and collectors were slower to accept such art. While much excellent small bronze sculpture flourished in the 1910s, "the subsequent veneration of the avant-garde spelled the neglect of the American bronze in the annals of art history" (2). According to Aronson, the women sculptors of Vonnoh's generation, who mostly produced studio bronzes and garden statuary, have been little studied because of several factors. Sculpture itself remains marginalized within American art history, although monuments have gotten increasingly serious consideration because of their political dimensions. Only Harriet Whitney Frishmuth (1880–1980) has received the same level of scholarship as her male colleagues, in a lavish recent monograph (2006).[1] In addition, feminist art historians have given little attention to Vonnoh, perhaps because of her conventional lifestyle and academic approach. Despite the relative conservatism of Vonnoh's statuettes, American artists, critics, and patrons of the mid-1890s considered them "modern," celebrating their "refreshing unaffectedness, vibrancy, and encapsulation of contemporary American life" (3). Vonnoh was embraced and promoted; she won numerous awards, critical acclaim, significant patronage (President Woodrow Wilson's family and Henry Ford, among others, collected her work), and she was a member of the most prestigious professional societies.

Vonnoh was among the first American sculptors to focus on small bronzes, producing affordable sculpture for the home. Her oeuvre, close to two hundred works (not counting duplicates and variations), also included terracotta statuettes, portrait busts, plasters, marbles, and noteworthy public commissions, such as the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bird Fountain at Oyster Bay and the Frances Hodgson Burnett Fountain in Central Park.

Aronson's nine amply illustrated chapters are brief, ranging from ten pages of text to thirty-two. However, they are tightly focused and full of contextual analysis. There is no section of catalogue entries or list of works in the exhibition; works are integrated into the narrative.

In the opening chapter, "An Embryo Sculptor," Aronson sketches Bessie Potter Vonnoh's early years, calling her by her birth name in the first five chapters, as she explains in one-page "Notes to the Reader" after the list of lenders to the exhibition. Born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1872, Potter was the only child of Ohio natives. Her father died in an accident while driving horses when Potter was two, and shortly thereafter Potter developed a growth-stunting grave illness, likely polio, that lasted until she was ten. In 1877, Potter moved to Chicago where her mother's family was based. She discovered her penchant for modeling as a seven-year-old. The principal of her school noted her deftness and declared that she was "an embryo sculptor." There, she studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago under Lorado Taft (1860–1936), "the father of Chicago's women sculptors" (14), who hired her as a Saturday studio assistant to subsidize her tuition. None of her student work survives, but newspapers lauded her plaster portraits and figures, particularly the sentimental mythological theme of her nude *Echo*, 1891.

In the summer of 1891, Potter visited New York, and then concluded her formal education that fall, after three years of study.

Aronson describes the sculptor's participation in the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in "A White Rabbit in the White City." Potter was one of six women whom Taft hired as assistants on his two commissions for the Horticulture Building. Architect and Exposition project manager Daniel Burnham told Taft he could hire anyone, even white rabbits, if they could help out, and thus the industrious young sculptors earned their nickname. Potter lost her first competition to Alice Riedout, but all proposed models were displayed at the fair. In the Fine Arts Building, she exhibited two plasters, a bust of Professor David Swing and a portrait relief of Mr. MacGillivray (whereabouts unknown), both 1891. The effects of Potter's informal apprenticeship and the Fair would influence her for years to come.

One of Aronson's most important chapters is next, "The Joy and Swing of Modern American Life," which is what Potter declared that she aimed to capture in her sculpture. The author thoroughly examines the artist's early works, most of which are known only through reproductions today. None of these images appeared in the exhibition, but Aronson's discussion of them is crucial to understanding the origins of the sculptures now commonly associated with Potter. In the spring of 1894, Potter rented her own studio in the Athenaeum Building in Chicago, on the same floor as Lorado and Zulime Taft, Carrie Brooks, and Janet Scudder. It became a hive of activity. Gaining renown for plaster busts and figures of friends and associates, Potter became a local celebrity and achieved financial stability. She had seen Rodin's work at the Exposition, and she asserted her modernity, with her jaggedly terminated likeness of Taft. By contrast, her portraits of women had a greater degree of idealizing abstraction than her more naturalistic images of men. This reflected Potter's admiration of fifteenth-century Italian sculpture, especially that of Andrea del Verrocchio and Francesco Laurana.

Potter quickly became known for her portrait statuettes of women, which may have numbered more than one hundred by 1898, when her interest in them faded. These "...intimate, delicately modeled renditions of actual people in the fashion of the day were interpreted concurrently as both portraiture and genre" (33). While hailed as an individual approach to the statuette, they were also considered as representative of the best features of typical American womanhood. Here Aronson provides a succinct but insightful history of the portrait statuette in France and the United States. She then discusses American subject matter, Impressionism, and Robert Vonnoh's increasing attraction to Chicago after working in Boston and France. He and Potter shared "a commitment to the familiar" (39). Potter rapidly executed whole figures of American women in clay (about 14-18 inches in height) in modern dress, had them cast in plaster, and sometimes tinted the statuettes, which she called "Potterines." Her prominent sitters were almost exclusively women, who found her work appealing because of its delicacy, fluid modeling, and reasonable price, \$25 a piece. The income she received from these allowed Vonnoh to begin having her work cast in bronze. Her "belief in the emotive potential of suggestion, rather than description, distinguished Potter's portrait statuettes from those of the earlier French Romantic sculptors" (42).

Aronson places such work in the context of the "American Girl" and "A Summer Girl," terms ubiquitous in the popular media of the period. She also compares them to the polychrome

figurines of ancient Hellenistic Greece, terracotta statuettes from the town of Tanagra in Boetia, discovered in the early 1870s and exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) in 1890. Contemporary writers frequently made the comparison, irking Potter because it "subverted her self-image as a pioneering record of modern life in a modern idiom" (49). Although the Potterines did not attract many imitators, one exception was Enid Yarnell, who produced a full-length figure of her sister reading a book, similar in size and style, though less delicate, than Potter's statuettes. Following in the tradition of Thomas Ball, who had created celebrity sculptures, Potter modeled the standing actress *Julia Marlowe as Juliet* in 1895, a work she viewed as crucially important because of the sitter's fame, and the chance to depict a simpler costume in broad, vigorous treatment with more emotional expression. Potter also created portraits of children, capturing their innocence and charm while avoiding moralizing tendencies. When she was just twenty-three, Taft placed Potter in charge of his class at the Art Institute while he worked on a commission in Ann Arbor. That same year the Arché Club, a women's organization, gave one hundred dollars to the AIC to purchase work by a woman sculptor. The museum bought seven of Potter's statuettes, the first pieces they acquired by a female sculptor. All but two of them have disappeared.

"Something of Her Own to Say: *A Young Mother* and *Girl Dancing*," Aronson's longest chapter, concerns two of Potter's most successful works. Aronson begins by arguing that the sculptor's three-month trip to Paris in the summer of 1895 had a profound impact on her maturation as an artist, although Potter denied this influence, insisting that she was an all-American talent. The climax of the sojourn was a visit with three other women to Rodin's studio where the master presented a little torso to Potter, who treasured it. Potter spoke no French, but communicated with "smiles, eloquent gestures and glances," expressing "frank pleasure" with the gift" (63). Surely, the European sojourn allowed Potter to observe a wealth of art and working methods directly. She provided a roster of some of the sculptors she had met and admired, including "Dubois, Damp, Mercié, Falguière, and many others" (62). Aronson suggests that Potter may have also accompanied Taft to the studios of Jean Geoffroy, Louis-Ernest Barrias, and Frederick MacMonnies.

The lengthiest section of this chapter regards *A Young Mother*, modeled after classmate Margaret Gerow Proctor cradling an unknown child. Aronson deftly places this work in the contact of contemporary artistic trends and the popularity of motherhood images in the late nineteenth century, a "...source of comfort in an unstable world, at a time when the clearly defined gender roles that had underpinned society were being shattered" (73). Mariolatry (reverence for the Virgin Mary) experienced a revival in that period, and mother-and-child paintings by Mary Cassatt and George DeForest Brush, which evoked Renaissance madonnas, were quite popular. Although Potter's rendition was more conventional than that of Cassatt, it was also more earthy and healthy than Brush's ethereal images. A likely source was the work of Jules Dalou's work, such as *Maternal Joy*, 1872, which Potter could have seen in a Paris shop. However, Potter's relaxed mother in a dressing gown has a lithesome elegance compared to Dalou's mother with her robust proportions. *A Young Mother* demonstrates other distinctive qualities of Potter's mature style: "...a continuous flowing of one form into another, an emphasis on elegant lines, and a sophisticated composition" with a "soften, atmospheric visual impression" (77-78). Bronze castings of it won at least four awards, appeared in nine major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and graced the home that Frank Lloyd Wright designed for Mr. and Mrs. Avery Coonley.

In 1897 Potter went to Italy where she would carve a bust, a relief medallion, two statuettes of adults, and four portraits of children in marble. Although feted in Florence, Potter experienced self-doubt. The medium of marble seemed stiff and unsuited to her impressionistic and expressive style. Thereafter, she used marble only for the occasional portrait bust.

In contrast, *Girl Dancing*, 1897, was one of the most esteemed sculptures of Potter's entire career, truly designed to engage viewers from every vantage point. The subject of dancing women was a lifelong favorite and it "...reinforced the prevalent view of her work as the modern descendant of the Tanagra figurine" (85). Although it evokes high-waisted Empire fashions, the dancer's loose-fitting gown simply gives the appearance of one because Potter intended the statuette to be a contemporary young woman in costume. The work immediately sold to one of the Chicago women's clubs, as did a piece critics called a pendant, *Girl Reading*, modeled the same year.

Positive reception of these sculptures encouraged Potter's continuations of small-scale, broadly modeled works on everyday themes. Critic Frank Owen Payne, describing *A Study* in 1898, felt that the power of Potter's serene sculpture lay in her treatment of eyes; "...she secures the most lifelike expression of eyes on which examination are not seen to possess any of the details of anatomy" (91). In comparison to the sketchiness and informality of this piece was *Day Dreams*, modeled the same year, a strictly frontal rendition of two beautiful young women lounging on a sofa. Aronson astutely contextualizes this fluid, sensuous work in terms of the Elgin Marbles that Potter saw at the British Museum, as well as the paintings of the Aesthetic Movement by artists such as Albert Moore and James McNeill Whistler. The author notes that, "Although in recent years *Day Dreams* has generated more interest than any other work by the sculptor—not only for its virtuosity but for issues it raises about fin-de-siècle notions of female companionship and upper-class women and leisure—it was little admired in its day" (95). Contemporary viewers, upon seeing the tinted plaster (rather than the bronzes known today), apparently disliked its aestheticism and found it trivial.

In the brief fifth chapter, "Of Monuments and Marriage," Aronson examines Potter's life from the spring of 1898 to 1900 when the sculptor earned two significant public commissions, was accepted to the male-dominated National Sculpture Society (the second woman to be included), left Chicago, and became engaged to Robert Vonnoh, two months after the death of the painter's first wife. Four months later, they wed in a small ceremony in Vonnoh's Rockland Lake house, and then honeymooned in France and England. Friends worried that the marriage and motherhood would spell the end of Potter's career, but Vonnoh was an exceptionally supportive husband and the sculptor remained involuntarily childless.

The second-longest chapter, "'Calculated to Quicken the Love for Sculpture': Small Bronzes and Terracottas," concerns the nine years following Vonnoh's wedding. The sculptor's marriage to a well-established painter meant that she did not have to pursue lucrative commission projects, but she had new domestic responsibilities. These factors, combined with the increasing demand for castings of her work, caused her to focus on small bronze sculpture. Here Aronson inserts an insightful history of small bronzes in America, emphasizing the crucial role of the National Sculpture Society in developing their growing popularity in the early twentieth century. Vonnoh's bronzes of babies and children were particularly appealing; *His First Journey*, modeled 1901; cast c. 1906, of a reclining pudgy tot lifting himself to crawl,

had over thirty-nine castings. *Hester*, modeled 1901; cast 1901–1903, was one of Vonnoh's most charming works with its sensitive, lifelike modeling of skin and roughly delineated irises and pupils. The little girl's large, perky bow offsets the drop of her frock on the opposite shoulder. And *Bust of Baby*, modeled 1901; cast 1901–1904, was unlike anything Vonnoh had done before with its rugged termination and "...the striking naturalism of the head with its crest of fine hair and eyes puffy from sleep" (121).

In 1902 Vonnoh's neighbor, a German immigrant mother of eight children, modeled for two of her most highly regarded works, *Motherhood* and *Enthroned*. Helena Walter stands, cradling her baby in her left hand, her right holding that of a daughter who in turn clasps that of her sister. Unlike *A Young Mother*, this is a mature woman, somewhat weary from her busy life. That new seriousness is also evident in *Enthroned*. Here, Walter sits with baby on lap flanked by the two girls, her head framed by the halo-like form on the chair behind her. The reference to the Madonna Enthroned in secular terms was clear, as was the representation of "...three progressive phases of childhood, from dependence to independence" (125). This aristocratic and refined, four-figure group was one of Vonnoh's most complex works.

Not truly content in idyllic Rockland Lake, Vonnoh longed for more community life and creative stimulation, and thus she and Robert moved into a cooperative studio building in Manhattan in 1903. Two years later they moved next door to the new, luxurious "The Atelier," whose tenants included many artists. In 1904, the Society of American Artists called *Enthroned* "the most meritorious work by an American woman" and awarded Vonnoh the Julia A. Shaw Memorial Prize. At the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in Saint Louis that year, she exhibited ten bronzes, winning a gold medal—the only woman to do so.

In the winter of 1907–1908 when she was in France, Vonnoh exhibited work internationally for the first time, at the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts and Durand-Ruel's, as well as the International Society of Sculptors, Painters, and Gravers at the New Gallery in London. The only known statuette of a Vonnoh sculpture with a French foundry mark is *The Scarf* from 1908. The same model wearing a generalized version of the Ionic chiton crisscrossed by ribbon across the chest appears in *The Dance*, modeled c. 1908; cast 1913. Both rather hushed and introverted performers were meant to suggest a contemporary dancer in Greek costume, somewhat echoing the popularity of the shockingly unrestrained dancer Isadora Duncan (1878–1927) who also saw close parallels between sculpture and dance.

In 1909 Vonnoh experimented with terracotta and might have produced as many as twenty-four statuettes in the medium, installing a kiln in her studio. Only three have surfaced. Aronson discusses these in light of work by Clodion, Carpeaux, Dalou, and Carrier-Belleuse, who also focused on quotidian themes. Among the most appealing is *Good Night* (or *On the Sandman's Trail*, modeled 1909 or 1910; cast by 1915, of a groggy little girl in a nightgown. One of Vonnoh's most popular designs, it had more than fifty-six bronze replicas. The Brooklyn Museum purchased six of Vonnoh's terracotta sculptures in 1913, but sold all in 1941 when it needed funds.

Aronson next describes the rise of American bronzes when commercial galleries began to include them in their exhibitions. In 1908 there were more bronzes at the Fifth Regiment Armory Show in Baltimore than ever before and critics remarked upon them for the first time.

Attendance exceeded 2000 in the first week alone, and Vonnoh's eight works received favorable reviews. Encouraged, the National Sculpture Society organized a show exclusively devoted to 150 small bronzes by American sculptors which travelled to six cities in 1909 and 1910 and attracted more than 30,000 visitors in Chicago, as well as 18,000 in Pittsburgh. Eight cities hosted a second circuit in 1912–1913. Sales were lively and critics decided that the "personal equation," a term for individuality, made small bronzes superior to monumental sculpture. Aronson concluded this section by briefly mentioning Vonnoh's popular first solo exhibition, held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in March 1910. Grateful for her first retrospective during which she sold three works, Vonnoh gave a bronze of *Enthroned* to the Corcoran.

Chapter 7 has a vague title, "New Directions." It concerns the period of 1909 to 1918 when Vonnoh shifted from her wholehearted devotion to statuettes to include a third public sculpture, her first garden figure, and decorative pieces for the home. In 1909 Vonnoh accepted her first public commission in ten years, the most prestigious of her career, a marble bust of Vice President James Schoolcraft Sherman for the Senate Wing of the U.S. Capitol. Unfortunately, a dark mark in the marble emerged in the left cheek and darkened over time, one of the few blemishes on Vonnoh's work. Critics hailed the sculptor's treatment of the sitter's eyeglasses, not a feature Vonnoh wanted to include, but executed admirably.

From 1911 to 1913, Vonnoh exhibited many works in major cities throughout the country (in shows often arranged by her husband) and at the annual Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The Vonnohs summered at Grez in 1912 when Bessie also painted. In early 1913 she displayed several new sculptures, including *In Grecian Draperies*, modeled 1912 or 1913, a modern American woman in ancient Greek attire. It appeared in Vonnoh's largest solo exhibition, of forty-five works, at the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, which purchased thirteen of them. Also on view was the plaster version of *Water Lilies*, modeled 1913, a non-commissioned figure of a naked little girl. One of the most interesting black-and-white photographs in the book is an image of twenty of Vonnoh's sculptures grouped together on a three-tiered table before exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1914. On the floor in front of the collection is *Water Lilies* in a basin containing a couple of bronze water lilies. Vonnoh felt that such a display was essential to attract potential buyers. Indeed, the sculpture won the National Arts Club Prize in 1920 and more than twenty-three bronze castings were made.

In 1913 the First Lady, Ellen Axson Wilson, requested that Vonnoh, who was a summertime neighbor of hers in Cornish, New Hampshire, sculpt a bust of her daughter, Jessie, who had previously sat for the artist in 1909; that work is now lost. Vonnoh's pure white marble, with its "meltingly soft appearance" (170), effectively captures the sitter's beauty and incisive character. The same year Vonnoh produced a sculpture of Joan of Arc (lost) on the five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Maid of Orléans. Vonnoh may have created the piece for a competition in the city of New York. If that is the case, it suggests that the artist was interested in monumental sculpture, after all, perhaps especially because of the rare chance to honor a woman on a large scale.

After trips to Florida and Paris in early 1914, the Vonnohs searched for an ideal retreat, which they finally found in 1916, near Lyme, Connecticut. They bought over three hundred acres and exhibited regularly with the Lyme Art Association where Vonnoh's sculpture, including new,

barefoot and barelegged dancing girls, sold briskly. The artist painted more frequently, and even exhibited an oil (whereabouts unknown) at the National Academy of Design.

In "'Youth in All Its Grace and Loveliness': Vonnoh's Garden Statuary," Aronson examines the series of larger scale pieces that the sculptor launched in late 1919, frustrated in part by her reputation for intimate sculpture, and the rejection of *Water Lilies* from an important exhibition of contemporary American sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1918 because of its small size. The fact that *Water Lilies* subsequently won a prize at the 1920 exhibition of the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors gave Vonnoh confidence in her larger work. Garden sculpture dominated her creative output in the 1920s.

Among Vonnoh's important pieces at this time was *Bird Fountain*, modeled 1919-20, of a partially clad, carefree girl supporting a bird on her uplifted right hand and holding a shallow bowl in the other. It seems that Vonnoh offered three-foot, four-foot, and five-foot castings, although only the latter are known. The birdbaths dated only from 1912 because of increasing bird conservation in the early twentieth century. Vonnoh's interest in the subject was enhanced by her acquaintanceships with some of the most eminent naturalists in New York, such as taxidermist Carl Akeley, zoologist William Beebe, and ornithologist Frank M. Chapman. The National Association of Audubon Societies commissioned a sculpture from her in honor of Theodore Roosevelt, who had created fifty bird sanctuaries. Vonnoh saw the installation of the *Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bird Fountain* in Oyster Bay, Long Island, New York (the site of Roosevelt's grave), in 1927.

In the early 1920s the Vonnohs struggled a bit financially, being forced to pay rent for the years their Paris apartment lay unoccupied during the war. The sculptor was beginning to get far-sighted and used that as an excuse to avoid making artwork. Her neighbor, Richard Maynard prodded her to sculpt a life size figure of his daughter and helped her with the physical work; she had no studio assistant. In the meantime, she produced the garden sculpture, *Springtime of Life*, 1925, which won the prize for the best single figure at the Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition of the Philadelphia Art Alliance in 1928. She also came out with *In Arcadia*, a tabletop group of a reclining male flutist and a seated young woman in a narrow, frieze-like space. Aronson asserts that both the composition and the subject reflect Vonnoh's admiration for the paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and other artists who "dwelt on idyllic conceptions of the classical past" (191).

During this decade Vonnoh created one of her best-loved sculptures, the *Frances Hodgson Burnett Memorial*, 1926–1937, for the Conservatory Garden of Central Park. Eleven years after she began her model, Vonnoh saw the unveiling. This charming, Beaux-Arts style piece also depicts a reclining piping Pan, as well as a standing female figure who upholds a birdbath, with a bird perched on her arm.

In 1928 Vonnoh modeled two life-size garden sculptures on speculation, each of the Maynard girls. Sylvia posed for *April Showers* and Beverly modeled for *Sea Sprite*. The sculptor idealized and streamlined the girls' bellies and arched their backs, as in *Water Lilies*. While Vonnoh's reputation was at its peak, critics began to condemn garden statuary for its poverty of meaning, despite excellent craftsmanship. As Aronson explains, "The jarring disparity between its frivolous content, and concomitantly its intimate association with privilege, and the

Depression into which American was rapidly sinking make it appear to some not only outmoded but offensive" (204).

The last chapter, "Hail to the Blythe Spirit: Vonnoh's Late Years," concisely treats the last twenty-five years of Vonnoh's life which saw a gradual decline in productivity until she stopped working about 1950. Although wealthy New Yorkers continued to buy her work, she pursued other creative pursuits besides sculpture. In the early 1930s, Vonnoh was primarily concerned with commissioned sculpture, the most important of which was a lovely group of children portrayed nude. These were the daughters and son of a surgeon, Dr. Philip Gillette Cole, who modeled for an outdoor group at the palatial family home in Tarrytown, New York. During this time Vonnoh and her husband were increasingly apart physically and estranged emotionally. In part, this was because Robert's insecurity and a degenerative eye disease. Additionally, Vonnoh's aging mother went to live in a nursing home. She passed away in early 1932. That spring, Robert moved to France for the remainder of his life, dying there in late 1933.

In 1935 Vonnoh produced an unusual and markedly stylized sculpture for a swimming pool niche in a private home in Port Chester, New York, as well as a virile portrait bust of ornithologist Frank Chapman's seventieth-fifth birthday. The following year she created a series of at least thirty sixteen-inch tall dolls in nineteenth-century costume, sewing their miniature clothing and making all their accessories. Her display of them at Grand Central Art Galleries was enormously popular, but Vonnoh made it clear that the dolls were just a playful diversion, embodying nostalgia for pre-Civil War America. Vonnoh then worked on her painting and sculpted for friends and relatives. From 1942 to 1944 she taught modeling at a summer camp in Elizabethtown, New York. In 1948 Vonnoh surprised everyone by marrying a second time. Her marriage to physician Edward Keyes was brief; however, her husband died of a heart attack less than a year later.

On her eightieth birthday, art students in Elizabethtown feted Vonnoh with a banner that read "Hail to the Blithe Spirit." Two years later the sculptor passed away. In her will she bequeathed as much of her artwork to the Corcoran as it wished to select; she was grateful for her first retrospective there in 1910 and a second in 1919. Today, the Corcoran has the largest single collection of Vonnoh's work, sixteen bronzes.

Aronson concludes that, in the last years of the nineteenth century, Vonnoh was among those who changed the course of American sculpture by elevating the status of small bronzes and expanding the subject matter deemed appropriate for sculpture of artistic merit. She surely inspired other sculptors of portrait statuettes, such as Enid Yandell, Carol Brooks MacNeil, and especially Abastenia St. Leger Eberle. And, I would add, she likely also inspired African American women sculptors of the early twentieth century, such as Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller and Augusta Savage. Ironically, although Vonnoh served as a role model and broke down institutional barriers, her critical success was predicated in part on playing into the stereotypes of women's art. It is "...delicate, fragile, intimate, domestic—in a word, what was termed 'feminine'"(223), and nearly all critics read her art in gendered terms. Vonnoh succeeded exactly because she expressed "femininity" in her art. Yet her work was also inspired by, and compared to, the Tanagra figurines of Hellenistic Greece. For contemporary sculptors, these elicited both reflection on past civilizations and associations with the ideal modern woman.

Vonnoh also produced contemporaneous types, but of a more casual character, depicting real people engaged in daily activities. Such freshness and naturalness of vision is what makes her work still appealing today and what has made this notable touring exhibition attractive to a growing body of admirers who were previously unaware of Vonnoh's achievements.

Janis Conner's welcome and useful essay is "After the Model: Bessie Potter Vonnoh's Early Bronzes and Founders." As a dealer in American sculpture specializing in works from 1850 to 1950, Conner has extensive experience in studying turn-of-the-century bronzes and comparing duplicate examples of the same model. She argues that differences that result from a combination of casting process and finishing technique make every replica a unique work of art, and she helps to demystify issues of authenticity and quality. Conner does this by focusing on two of Vonnoh's earliest and most popular models, *A Young Mother*, 1896, and *Girl Dancing*, 1897, both of which were produced at all three of these foundries in New York: Henry-Bonnard Bronze Company Founders, Roman Bronze Works, and the Gorham Manufacturing Company. They also convey the best attributes of Vonnoh's sculpture. Further, Conner distinguishes the refinement of original casts from posthumous and unauthorized casts, considered inauthentic, in judging the quality of Vonnoh's bronzes. Her analysis is based primarily on expert connoisseurship; no ledgers, correspondence, invoices, or other materials have been found regarding Vonnoh's relationship with Henry-Bonnard (established 1872), where the sculptor first ordered bronzes, which were sand cast. Recently, Conner made the significant discovery that the bronzes are numbered within Vonnoh's signature; tiny Arabic numerals appear in the "B" of "Bessie."

By 1899 Henry-Bonnard was in competition with Roman Bronze Works, which opened in Brooklyn and immediately drew sculptors, such as Vonnoh, who wanted lost-wax casting. Her casts are listed in three ledgers between 1903 and 1918. Imprecise titles (such as "mother and child" and "dancing girl") and edition numbers of works are problematic because of clerical errors and omissions. However, Conner patiently solves such puzzles through the process of elimination and by examining the works closely, providing readers with high-resolution photographic details. Her visual comparison of three casts of *A Young Mother* is remarkable as she points out exceptional qualities in each. She conducts a similar analysis of two versions of the highly impressionistic work, *Girl Dancing*, cast in *cire-perdue* bronze at both Roman Bronze Works and Gorham, discerning scrupulous attention to differences in dress folds, the ribbon bow, hair curls, and roses adorning the coiffure.

Unfortunately, the Roman Bronze plant burned in 1921, destroying a number of Vonnoh's plasters, and the artist herself is said to have gotten rid of all but two of the plasters stored in her studio in the early 1950s. Unauthorized casts of work appeared already during her lifetime and proliferated beginning in the 1970s; these are of noticeably inferior quality, sometimes made from aluminum-bronze, a cheap alloy with a gummy patina. Unlike a number of artists who hovered over foundry work before it left the factory, Vonnoh generally provided little guidance on expectations for the finished product. Occasionally, though, she returned work for re-coloring. Conner argues an aesthetic response should also be part of the evaluation of a bronze from an edition, and concludes: "Recognizing nuances should enhance appreciation of the object, and the opportunity to compare early casts of Vonnoh's first models is an opportunity to engage in the pleasures of connoisseurship" (247).

I have only a few quibbles with the book because of some awkward choice of words, such as the verb in "The...Exposition infected the young sculptor with elated optimism...(20)," and split infinitives (as in "each cast can nevertheless be distinguished" (225), and inaccurate assertions, such as "...nearly every American artist eventually made the pilgrimage to The White City" (20). There is an occasional editing mistake, too. For instance, while one exhibition of a CAM catalogue mentioned in the preface is italicized, the other in the same sentence is not and a "s" is missing in the last word of the sentence, "a distinction from many earlier celebrity statuette [*sic*]"(56). Dates are missing, as well, for such work as two sculptures by Thomas Ball (54) and *Joan of Arc* by Paul Dubois (62). With such meticulous research, it is surprising that there are omissions, such as the names of *The Twins* who inscribed their names in the wet clay of the base; we do not know which was the outgoing girl and which the shy one. A word also seems to be lacking in this quotation by Daniel Chester French, "The Henry-Bonnard Bronze Co. 430 West 16th Street are I consider the best bronze-founders. . ."(98); no "*sic*" appears. There are a couple of inexplicable design issues, such as the first part of chapter titles in regular font followed by no colons and italicized subtitles. And there are no reproductions of two-dimensional works by Vonnoh who painted quite a bit, although perhaps none could be found. These minor concerns are certainly forgivable. There are also a couple of contradictory passages, but these are matters of opinion by different authors. On page 161, for example, Aronson declares, "Vonnoh was such a perfectionist that. . .," but on page 246, Conner asserts, "Vonnoh was not by nature a perfectionist." Finally, I would have appreciated a succinct, one or two-page chronology, similar to what appeared as a wall label in the exhibition.

This lovely catalogue has many commendable qualities not only in terms of content but also design. The large trim size of the book (11" x 8 ½") is much appreciated; it allows one to more carefully study the small statuettes reproduced in full-page illustrations and gives breathing room to the text which is surrounded by a comfortable margin of white space. There are fabulous detail shots of heads, hair, drapery, and signatures that permit close examination, as well. The title page faces a full-page, color reproduction of Robert Vonnoh's portrait of his wife from 1907. Curiously, there is a kind of second frontispiece and title page on pages xvi and 1 (the page numbers do not appear) before the introduction. A full-page color photograph of *Daphne*, modeled 1910 or 1911; cast 1915 (whose caption appears on page 3), faces the bronze book title underscored by a swoop or linear swirl, without the names of the authors and publisher. Although unexpected, this spare section gives one pause, and the reader lingers to contemplate the lines of the beautiful woman's body, uplifted arms, and flowing hair and gown. The bibliography is easy to use, divided into logical, but innovative categories beyond the typical sections devoted to manuscripts, archival sources, books, periodicals, newspapers, dissertations, and theses. There are also areas concerning "Lifetime Sources (through 1955)" and "Newspaper Articles Related to Maude Adams as the American Girl." Scholars photocopying portions of the publication will be grateful that pages on the left have a footer of the book title in pale bronze capital letters; on facing pages is the chapter title. Chapter numbers and subtitles throughout are in the same unobtrusive bronze, and lengthy quotations are highlighted by slight indentation and light black boldface. The elegant bronze swoop/swirl graces the book cover and ends each chapter. A row of six bronze dots separates the body of Conner's essay from her introduction and conclusion. Illustration captions feature the titles of works of art in a large, italicized, non-serifed font. The modeling and casting dates, founder, medium, and dimensions follow in smaller size. The name of collector or institution and acquisition number then appear on a separate line, still smaller, albeit perfectly legible. Such

thoughtful organizational and attractive design details, as well as Aronson's sterling prose based on her yeoman's research, make the catalogue a pleasure to read.

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Notes

[1] Janis Conner, Leah Rosenblatt Lehmbek, and Thayer Tolles, *Captured Motion: The Sculpture of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth* (New York, NY: Hohmann Holdings LLC, 2006).