



American Art: Lesbian, Nineteenth Century

by Carla Williams

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

According to cultural and art historians, the notions of "lesbian art" or "lesbian artist" did not exist prior to 1970. However, lesbian artists certainly existed and worked in the nineteenth century, their accomplishments all the more remarkable for the obstacles they faced both as women and as homosexuals. The reasons for their relative obscurity are easily apparent--serious women artists of any stripe were an anomaly in the nineteenth century, and sexism and homophobia in the arts mirrored that of the rest of the culture.

In order to have careers many women artists resorted to simple deceptions, such as signing their works with a first initial and surname in order to avoid obvious gender identification, just as many women writers used male pen names in order to get their works published.

Their fears were well-founded--lesbian sculptor Anne Whitney (1821-1915), for example, won a commission in 1875 for a sculpture of the abolitionist Clark Sumner, only to be denied the job when it was realized she was a woman. Likewise, disbelieving critics accused lesbian sculptor Harriet Hosmer (1830-1908) of exhibiting her male teacher's work as her own.

Mary Ann Willson

Little definitive information survives about early nineteenth-century lesbian artists and their lives. Although not much is known about her, one exception is Mary Ann Willson (active 1810-1825), a New York-based folk artist who is considered to be one of the first American watercolorists. Her paintings, made with natural pigments derived from berry juice, brick dust, and vegetable dyes, ranged in subject matter from biblical narratives to a colorful, fanciful mermaid holding an arrow in one hand (*Mermaid*, ca 1815).

The self-taught Willson settled around 1810 on Red Mill Road, Greenville Town, Greene County, New York, with a Miss Brundage, with whom she bought land and built a log cabin home. Willson painted and sold her pictures, mainly to her farmer neighbors, while Brundage farmed their land.

American Expatriates in Europe

Many lesbian artists found a receptive climate in Europe where more training opportunities were open to them. Financial freedom was often a determining factor--most of the women who studied in Europe came from wealthy families, which afforded them the freedom to travel and pay for their private educations. Of the best-known American lesbian artists of the nineteenth century, nearly all spent time in France or Italy in creative and intellectual communities that nurtured their talents. For painters, the destination was Paris; for sculptors, Rome.



Top: Harriet Hosmer
Center: Anne Whitney
Above: Emma Stebbins
Images of Anne Whitney and Emma Stebbins courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

The establishment throughout Europe in the late 1700s of separate art academies for women had transformed their opportunities to study from original works and develop their talents. European women artists who emerged in the eighteenth century, many from established artistic families, also began to take pupils informally. It would be the first time that women were able to study with women, demonstrating that an artistic career was reasonable and within reach. By the end of the century many of these women would even become instructors in the traditional male-only academies.

Women Sculptors in Rome

The women sculptors who went to Rome to tackle their recalcitrant medium were in the forefront of a burgeoning feminism that would not accept a lesser status for women's work. They were already radical, since sculpture was not considered an art form appropriate for women.

"[T]hat strange sisterhood of American 'lady sculptors' who at one time settled upon the seven hills [of Rome] in a white, marmorean flock," is how novelist Henry James, referring to their preference for the fine white marble quarried near Rome, famously dubbed lesbian sculptors Hosmer, Whitney, Mary Edmonia Lewis (1844-1909), and Emma Stebbins (1815-1882)--along with non-lesbians Louisa Lander, Margaret Foley, Florence Freeman, and Vinnie Ream Hoxie (the only "sister" to marry).

These artists worked primarily in the neo-Classical style, producing monumental sculptures of historical and allegorical female subjects including Cleopatra; Beatrice Cenci; Hagar, the biblical servant of Sarah; and Zenobia, the Queen of Palmyra.

Harriet Hosmer

Harriet Goodhue Hosmer, from a liberal Unitarian family in Watertown, Massachusetts, became the first American woman to heed the call to Rome. She knew from an early age that she wanted to be a sculptor and would not be dissuaded because of her gender. In 1852 Hosmer carved her first full-size marble work, *Hesper, the Evening Star*, and that same year moved to Rome to take an apprenticeship.

Within four years of her arrival Hosmer became financially independent through sales of her work. Her monumental work *Zenobia in Chains* (1859, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut) met with tremendous acclaim when exhibited in the United States, drawing 15,000 visitors to its exhibition in Boston. Its success allowed her to establish her Roman studio and she quickly became the "star" of the Roman art world, frequently compared to her male counterpart, the celebrated sculptor William Wetmore Story.

Anne Whitney

Anne Whitney, also from a Massachusetts Unitarian family and a friend of Hosmer's, was a published poet before turning to the visual arts. Whitney was politically active and her work reflected her political and social beliefs. She worked in Boston as a sculptor, where she met with success. In 1866 she, too, went to Rome, and upon her return in 1871 she received a commission for the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., for a sculpture of Revolutionary War hero Samuel Adams.

Whitney completed more than one hundred works, including a portrait bust of her friend Lucy Stone (Boston Public Library), an early feminist who was the first Massachusetts woman to earn a college degree and who kept her name when she married, inspiring later feminists to dub themselves "Lucy Stoners."

Whitney established her studio at 92 Mount Vernon Street on Beacon Hill in Boston. She is said to have had a "Boston marriage" with the painter Abby Adeline Manning (dates unknown), whose work has fallen into obscurity and who is remembered now only as Whitney's longtime companion.

Mary Edmonia Lewis

Unique among the sisterhood was Mary Edmonia Lewis (1844-1909). The only daughter of an Ojibwa (Chippewa) Indian mother and African-American father, she was the most remarkable of the American expatriates because of her humble beginnings and mixed race heritage. Born in upstate New York in 1844 and orphaned at an early age, Lewis attended Oberlin College but left amidst a scandal and never graduated.

In 1863 Lewis went to Boston to study with the sculptor Edward A. Brackett, and it was there that she met and befriended Hosmer and Whitney. For a time Lewis and Whitney maintained studios in the same building. Aside from the scant tutelage she received from Brackett and later from Whitney, Lewis was largely self-taught as a sculptor. Like Hosmer, she was wary of having her work attributed to her teachers so she chose not to continue with any formal education in art.

Lewis sailed for Rome in 1865. Her studio near the Spanish Steps was a popular destination for tourists and a gathering place for other expatriate artists and intellectuals, many of them women, and she supported herself from the sale of her work.

In Rome Lewis turned to African-American and Native American subjects that reflected her heritage, including at least three works about emancipation depicting freed men and women, and *The Old Indian Arrow Maker and His Daughter* (1872, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution).

"Masculine" Clothing and Appearance

"Wearer of masculine clothing" soon became a euphemism for the lesbian artist. Some, such as the French lesbian painter Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899), had to request special permission from the police to wear men's clothing to attend classes or to simply go about in public. Although any practical-minded woman artist in the nineteenth century would prefer the simple maneuverability of men's garments to the voluminous skirts of women's fashion, the habit is most famously associated with Bonheur, Lewis, and Hosmer.

Lewis wore so-called "mannish" attire, and Hosmer was sometimes called "mannish" in her appearance. Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose controversial novel *The Marble Faun* (1859) included the characters of two women sculptors in Rome, derisively described Hosmer's dress: "She [wore] a sort of man's sack of purple broadcloth, into the side pockets of which her hands were thrust as she came forward to greet us.... She had on a male shirt, collar and cravat, with a brooch of Etruscan gold." The attention to their dress made each of these famous lesbians popular with both tourists and the contemporary press because they defiantly went against the societal norm.

Lesbian Patron Charlotte Cushman

Patronage was an important factor for the nineteenth-century lesbian artist. Just as there were lesbian artists, so, too, were there lesbian patrons who bought and supported the work.

Boston-born actress Charlotte Saunders Cushman (1816-1876), famous for her gender-defying roles on the stage, was a kind of a guardian and patron to many artists including Lewis and Hosmer and hosted a salon that they all frequented.

Cushman was instrumental in encouraging Hosmer to relocate to Rome and made the initial journey with her. She provided Hosmer with free housing for her first seven years in Rome and arranged for her apprenticeship with sculptor John Gibson.

Eventually Cushman took the artist Emma Stebbins as her partner, introducing her to the sculpture medium. Stebbins, originally from New York, arrived in Rome at age forty-one, a mature woman but novice artist.

Cushman helped Stebbins receive some of her more important public commissions, and her works now stand in Brooklyn, Boston, and New York's Central Park (*Angel of the Waters*, ca 1862). After Cushman's death, Stebbins edited the actress's letters and published her biography.

Recognition

As the times changed lesbian artists became more prominent and their successes more frequent, although some achieved recognition only posthumously in the twentieth century.

In 1864 Hosmer wrote letters to the press successfully defending her work as her own, thereby gaining her rightful recognition and establishing the "masculine" medium as one that women could master. Hosmer, who was called "the most famous female sculptor of the century," was consequently influential to generations of women artists.

Lewis's monumental masterpiece, *The Death of Cleopatra* (National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution), was exhibited at the Centennial Expositions in 1876 in Philadelphia and in Chicago in 1878, where it generated a tremendous amount of excitement and interest.

Whitney later taught at Wellesley College in Massachusetts; her sculpture of Clark Sumner was eventually executed and erected in Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1902. Her Mount Vernon studio is now a featured stop on a walking tour of Beacon Hill in Boston.

In 1940 Bonheur's partner, the American painter Anna Elizabeth Klumpke (1856-1942), published a combination of her own memoirs and a biography of her lover. She is best known for her portraits of famous women such as Bonheur and women's rights advocate *Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (1889, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution).

Mary Ann Willson, who apparently stopped painting upon Brundage's death, was rediscovered in 1943 and her *Prodigal Son* watercolor series is now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art. In 1969 Willson's and Brundage's life together became the inspiration for Isabel Miller's popular novel *Patience and Sarah* (1972, originally self-published as *A Place for Us* in 1969).

Bibliography

Borzello, Frances. *A World of Our Own: Women Artists Since the Renaissance*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2000.

Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. Rev. ed. London: Thames and Hudson, 1997.

Dwyer, Britta C. *Anna Klumpke: A Turn-of-the-Century Painter and Her World*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999.

Klumpke, Anna Elizabeth. *Memoirs of an Artist*. Boston: Wright and Potter, 1940.

_____. *Rosa Bonheur: The Artist's (Auto)Biography*. Gretchen Van Slyck, trans. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Miller, Isabel. *Patience and Sarah*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1972.

Saslow, James M. *Pictures and Passions: A History of Homosexuality in the Visual Arts*. New York: Viking, 1999.

Sherwood, Dolly. *Harriet Hosmer, American Sculptor 1830-1908*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press,

1991.

Stebbins, Emma, ed. *Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories Of Her Life*, Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1879.

Wolfe, Rinna Evelyn. *Edmonia Lewis: Wildfire in Marble*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Silver Burdett Press, 1998.

Links to photographic portraits of many of the artists can be found at: http://www.altladies.com/Notable_Womyn.htm

Anne Whitney information: http://www.uuwhs.org/Mar2000Exhibit/3-WalkingTour/SBU3_template.html

Mary Ann Willson biography: <http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pbio?204770>

<http://www.patienceandsarah.com/>

About the Author

Carla Williams is a writer and photographer from Los Angeles, who lives and works in Santa Fe. Her writings and images can be found on her website at www.carlagirl.net.