



Hosmer, Harriet Goodhue (1830-1908)

by Jeffery Byrd

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Harriet Hosmer.
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Fighting against social barriers that kept women in positions of financial dependence, American sculptor Harriet Hosmer was among a small group of successful women artists in the nineteenth century.

Hosmer worked in the Neoclassical style popular in her day, although her works exhibited an approach to content that was markedly unlike that of her contemporaries. She established her reputation as a sculptor despite the commonly held notion that women were not artistically creative or physically capable of enduring the arduous process of carving marble.

Hosmer was raised as a boy by her physician father in Watertown, Massachusetts. Dr. Hosmer had lost his wife and other children to tuberculosis and thought that only the vigorous exercise common to boys could fortify his daughter against disease. He encouraged Hattie's interest in riding and shooting and encouraged her art by allowing her to set up her first studio on the family property.

Hosmer's behavior was considered scandalous. Her mannish dress and outgoing, casual conduct were entirely uncommon among women in her genteel circle and inspired gossip. With a great sense of adventure, she traveled the Mississippi without a chaperone. She explored mines and won a footrace up a high bluff against several young men. The bluff, near Lansing, Iowa, was christened Mt. Hosmer and still bears that name.

One of Hosmer's early works, *Hesper, the Evening Star* (1852), came to the attention of Boston actress Charlotte Cushman, a lesbian famous for playing "breeches" or men's parts, who was preparing to move to Rome. Knowing that most American art schools either refused to admit women or charged them more in tuition than men, Cushman convinced Hosmer's father to allow Hattie to move to Rome and live under her care.

Once in Rome, Hosmer was apprenticed to English sculptor John Gibson. This relationship would later be exploited by envious gossips claiming that Gibson actually did Hosmer's work. When Hosmer eventually employed a staff of artisans to carve her conceptions in marble (a practice common at the time), the slander grew until Hosmer filed successful lawsuits requiring several art magazines to retract their accusations of plagiarism.

Cushman's circle of friends consisted of mostly "emancipated" women, and the younger Hosmer quickly became a key figure in this world of creative and intellectual excitement. Fellow expatriate sculptors Anne Whitney and Edmonia Lewis looked to Hosmer as a role model, and she hobnobbed with literary figures such as Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Nathaniel Hawthorne (who dubbed her "queer").

Hosmer's abrupt personality sparked a great deal of discussion. She had no patience for the strict rules of decorum that regulated behavior among young ladies in polite circles of her day. Instead, she was driven to work long hours in the studio, perfecting her art.

As with other Neoclassical artists, Hosmer often depicted mythological figures and themes. She was drawn to female characters whose stories could be viewed as allegories for her strongly held feminist beliefs.

Zenobia in Chains (1859), for example, depicts a warrior queen captured by enemies and put on display for ridicule in her jewels and finery. This image can easily be read in relation to the condition of nineteenth-century women, who were placed on a pedestal but simultaneously enslaved by harsh financial constraints that bound them to men.

Unlike similar works depicting suffering women (such as Hiram Powers' *The Greek Slave*, 1843), Hosmer shows the queen clothed, proud, and stoic.

Hosmer was an admitted flirt. She shared a close relationship with her boarding school friend Cornelian Crow, who eventually became her biographer; but her most intense relationship was with Louisa Ashburton, a widowed Scottish noblewoman. The two shared finances and wrote intimate letters in which Hosmer used the term "wedded wife" in reference to herself.

Although intense friendships among women were common, Hosmer dropped her characteristic joking voice in many of the letters to Ashburton while speaking of devotion and also jealousy at the thought of being replaced by another woman. Ironically, Ashburton unsuccessfully proposed to Robert Browning in a peccadillo worthy of any soap opera.

Hosmer eventually returned to America, where she was welcomed as a celebrated artist. Her portrait of Queen Isabella was shown in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and was well received despite the fact that Neoclassicism was then seen as outdated.

Hosmer worked on inventing a perpetual motion machine before her death in Watertown in 1908.

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Jeffery Byrd, Professor of Art at the University of Northern Iowa, is a performance artist and photographer whose work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions and journals. He has performed at New York City's Lincoln Center and Alternative Museum, Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, Chicago's N.A.M.E. Gallery, and Cleveland's Performance Festival.