



Stebbins, Emma (1815-1882)

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Emma Stebbins was part of what Henry James called "a white Marmorean flock," women sculptors who went to Rome in the mid-1800s to learn to work in marble. She is remembered for sculpture produced in a ten year period between 1859 and 1869, when she was in her forties and early fifties.

Her career in art was supported by her own commissions, her wealthy New York family, and her lover, who was the most famous English-language actress of the mid-nineteenth century.

Stebbins was born on September 1, 1815 and raised in New York City, the third daughter and sixth of nine children of a bank president and a Nova Scotia-born mother. Her family encouraged her talents in art and writing. She studied at various American studios and was elected to the National Academy of Design in 1843. She exhibited in National Academy and other shows.

In 1857, at the age of forty-one, Stebbins went to Rome for further study. In that city--home to a sizable Anglo-American colony--she found a large infrastructure supporting art: teachers, technicians, artists, students, and a flow of international collectors. Stebbins remained in Rome for the next decade, during which the United States Civil War (1861-1865) took place.

Shortly after arriving in Rome, Stebbins met Charlotte Saunders Cushman (1816-1876). Handsome, charismatic, and an exceptionally successful actress, Cushman was recovering from the breakup of a ten-year relationship with actress and writer Matilda Hays. After an Easter trip to Naples in 1857, Stebbins and Cushman decided to spend their lives together.

Stebbins and Cushman's friendship circle included lesbian sculptor Harriet Hosmer (1830-1908) and African-American/Native-American sculptor (Mary) Edmonia Lewis (1843-*ca* 1911), who may also have been a lesbian. They were also acquainted with French lesbian painter Rosa Bonheur.

In Rome, Stebbins--who had originally trained as a painter--shifted her interest to an idealized form of figure sculpture. After a period of study, she supported herself through sculpture commissions, many from Americans. Cushman promoted her work and, at least once, raised funds for casting a major piece.

An early commission was a portrait bust of Cushman made in 1859-1860. Cushman had a prominent jaw of the type often referred to as "lantern," which Stebbins handled with grace and dignity. Her bronze statue of educator Horace Mann was installed outside the State House in Boston in 1865.

Stebbins' best known work rises above the Bethesda Fountain in New York City's Central Park. Unveiled in May 1873, *Angel of the Waters* is a draped, winged, bronze figure with arms spread downward, blessing the water below. Her pedestal is supported by four cherubs representing Health, Temperance, Purity, and Peace.



Emma Stebbins.
Image of Emma Stebbins
courtesy Library of
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Photographs Division.

When, in 1869, Cushman was operated on for breast cancer, Stebbins devoted herself to nursing her lover. The following year, the couple returned to the United States.

Cushman died of pneumonia in Boston in 1876 at the age of fifty-nine. She is buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge. Following Cushman's death, Stebbins wrote the actress's biography and compiled her correspondence: *Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories of Her Life* (1878).

After the death of Cushman, Emma Stebbins produced no more sculpture. She died in New York in 1882 at age sixty-seven of "phthisis," a progressive wasting disease, and is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York.

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About the Author

Tee A. Corinne was a photographer and writer. Her articles about lesbian art and artists appeared in numerous journals and encyclopedias. Her books include *The Cunt Coloring Book*, *Yantras of Womanlove*, *Dreams of the Woman Who Loved Sex*, *Courting Pleasure*, and *Intimacies*. She was the editor of *FABB: The Feminist Art Books Bulletin*, co-editor of the *Queer Caucus for Art Newsletter*, and member of the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.