

# Traveling between the Borders of Gender and Nationality:

19th Century American Women Artists in Rome

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Proctor*

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Writing in 1903 of the heyday of neoclassical sculpture nearly fifty years earlier, Henry James noted that, “[i]t was still an age in which an image had, before anything else, to tell a story ...” (169). It was at this liminal moment between the Enlightenment and modernity that the mid-nineteenth century witnessed the first major exodus of American women artists from their *fatherland*. Primarily sculptors, these pioneers retraced the steps of their immigrant forebearers to Europe, ostensibly in search of educational and economic benefits for their careers as artists across boundaries of language, culture, and gender. As if later-day Pygmalions, these artists breathed the life of their desires for transit and transition into the narratives of the works produced during and after their foreign sojourns; for example:

- *Daphne*, huntress and virgin follower of the goddess Diana. In Harriet Hosmer’s ideal bust, Daphne is encircled by laurel leaves, recalling the flight from amorous Apollo that resulted in her transformation into a laurel tree.

- *Cleopatra*: in her political and military travels she nearly subjected the Roman Empire to the Egyptian dynasty. But in the end she was brought to the ultimate self-transformation — suicide — rather than suffer defeat, a choice signalled in Margaret Foley’s ideal bust by the asp bracelet encircling

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*Bullets indicate text that refers to slides.*

her left arm.

- *Virginia Dare*, the first child of European descent born on the North American continent and symbol of the part women played in colonizing the Americas. But she and her family vanished without a trace, an absence ascribed in a life-sized rendering by Louisa Lander to Virginia Dare's having been adopted by a coastal American tribe and transformed into a native fishing queen.

In *Viaggio e Scrittura: Le straniere nell'Italia dell'Ottocento*, the hypothesis is advanced that "a feminine specificity existed in the journey". This specificity is found in the woman traveler's "double and multiple sense of belonging", implicit in the identity of women constructed under the sign of the feminine in patriarchal society, and also aligned under the sign of the masculine in their professions, their nationalities, or their travels. (11) <sup>1</sup>

Just such a doubled social positioning is at work for the expatriate artists examined here. They are the American women sculptors who were active in Rome for varying periods of time from 1848 until after 1887: Sarah Fisher Clappitt Ames, Harriet Hosmer, Louisa Lander, Emma Stebbins, Margaret Foley, Florence Freeman, Blanche Nevin, Horatia Augusta Latilla Freeman, Edmonia Lewis, Anne Whitney, Vinnie Ream, and German-American, Elizabet Ney. The travelers' tales of journey and transformation in question here are the narratives of heroic women from myth and legend, such as the ones briefly illustrated earlier, that were sculpted by these artists during and after their sojourns in Rome, and form a significant part of their *opera*.

For over 40 years there was at least one member of this first group of expatriate American women sculptors in Rome. Their number in the period of their greatest activity, from 1855 to 1875, was a source of surprise even to contemporaries. Henry James wrote of "that strange sisterhood who at one time settled upon the seven hills in a white Marmorean flock," (257) and the name has stuck despite its giving the mistaken impression that they emigrated *en masse* and lived as a proto-women artists' support group.

Like most sculptors of their period, American women artists established themselves in Rome to participate in the art industry that was centered there. Yet as the first American women to be internationally recognized for their work in sculpture, expatriation to Rome seems to have had an added

significance for these artists. In an 1869 letter to women's rights activist, the Rev. Phoebe Hanaford, expatriate sculptor Harriet Hosmer indicated her frustration with the professional opportunities available to women in the United States.

... what country is mine for women! Here every woman has a chance if she is bold enough to avail herself of it .... I honor every woman who has strength enough to step out of the beaten track if she feels her walk lies in another... (Hanaford 268-71).

Taking assertions such as Hosmer's at face value, it has been argued that women artists expatriated to escape attitudes towards women in their own countries: a conclusion perhaps symptomatic of a desire to establish matrilineal and to find our own feminist values reflected in the "her-stories" of our ancestresses. But this is too simplistic.

- First, the expatriate American women were not more shackled by conservative mores while they were in the United States, but were actively supported and patronized by a wide circle of powerful and affluent progressive New Englanders.

- Second, the conservative expatriate community in Rome, alarmed by the spectacle of women living on their own, often subjected these artists to an even stricter code of conduct than they endured at home.

- Third, the move to Rome represented entry into direct and often vicious competition at the top of their profession.

- And finally, their position as tourists in Rome allowed these women an added and advantageous masculine identity as "hero-travellers", constructed against the *topoi* of Rome that are cast in the role of feminine terrain and obstacle according to the classic naratological terms of Propp and Lotman. (This dialectic will be explored further below within the interpretations of Mary Russo and Teresa de Lauretis.)

What is needed in scholarship about the early American women sculptors is a greater recognition of the individuality and specificity of each of these women's careers and journeys to Rome, without assumptions of a sort of feminist herd mentality on their part, such as have been derived from

the unfortunate nickname, the “white marmorean flock”. The American women sculptors arrived in Rome over a period of 15 years, remained for periods that ranged from 20 months to over 20 years, and departed over an equally long span of time. Hence they were not “birds of a feather”, and they did not come to Rome to enjoy each other’s feminine *or* feminist society. They came to Rome, like their male peers, to stake their own claims in the very masculine worlds of sculpture and the international art market. However, unlike the men, the women sculptors had an added ‘stake’ in the gambit of working abroad.

Let us look again at Harriet Hosmer’s letter championing the expatriate life to Rev. Hanaford. In her blithe assertion that “Here *every* woman has a chance if she is bold enough to avail herself of it...”, she completely elides a consideration of the impossibility for most Roman women to have similar professional pursuits at that time.<sup>2</sup> Obviously Roman women do not figure in Hosmer’s definition of ‘every woman’; they fall so far beneath the threshold of representation as not even to be considered women at all.

In her essay, “Scrittura al Femminile negli Stati Uniti e in Italia,” Mary Russo makes an analogy between the foreigner’s view of Italy and a hologram; both are reproductions of an original, “simulat[ing] the intervention and the originality of the artist”, but lack its luminosity and depth (101).<sup>3</sup> Considering the impact of the hologram on those captured within it, Russo goes on to note that:

Italian women, for example, were ignored, both as authors and as political activists; rhetorical interest focused on the image of Italy as a feminine space. And the Italian women lived their “Italy-as-woman” as much as the contemporary women of some Caribbean islands live their existence in the terms of the romantic escape to the Tropics promoted by tourist agencies (105).<sup>4</sup>

Harriet Hosmer’s negation of Roman women is symptomatic that the American women in Rome were — perhaps even primarily — tourists. Against the *topoi* of Rome, a feminine space in the gendered dialectics of tourism, the women sculptors were effectively positioned as masculine subjects.

The story of modern tourism, then, bears a striking resemblance to the

mythological hero journeys of western literature. In her essay, "Desire in Narrative," from *Alice Doesn't*, semiotician Teresa de Lauretis refers to the narratological analyses of Propp and Lotman in asserting that the elements of the journey myth are invested with gendered meaning: the hero is the active, masculine figure who penetrates and overcomes the passive, feminine landscapes and obstacles of his journey. Further, "...each reader — male or female — is constrained and defined within the two positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other" (121).

So we must ask, as does de Lauretis, "...how or with which positions do readers, viewers, or listeners identify, given that they are already socially constituted women and men? In particular, what forms of identification are possible, what positions are available to female readers, viewers, and listeners?" (121).

De Lauretis argues that the hero narrative "...effects a splitting of the female subject's identification into the two mythical positions of hero (mythical subject) and boundary (spatially fixed object, personified obstacle)" (123). Thus de Lauretis proposes the "double identification" of women spectators of cinema, both with the feminized terrain and resisting characters or elements of the narrative, and, in an act of subjective transvestitism, with the active, masculine hero.

Similarly, it can be argued that expatriate women artists had a "double-dose" of identification: on the one hand, women sculptors functioned as masculine hero-tourists, journeying to prove themselves in a male-dominated profession. In this light the "flight" to Rome by the women sculptors indicates a rejection of the feminine positioning they lived in their own country, where, modeled in opposition to male Americans, they could only ever be representatives of femininity. It should be noted that in the case of Edmonia Lewis, of Native American and African-American parentage, this move could also have been an escape from the dangers attendant upon identification with the former slave class of the United States, the violence of which she had already suffered while a student.

In Rome, on the other hand, it was possible for even a woman, as long as she was a tourist, to occupy the position of masculine subject with respect to the feminized landscape and population. The move to Rome on the part of the women sculptors was, then, to use Griselda Pollock's term, a gambit:

that is, a strategic sacrifice of the comfort and security of their generally supportive communities at home in order to take up a position in the site of contest for their professional field — Rome, and to construct themselves as the masculine subjects they would have to be in order to be taken seriously as artists and as merchants of their works.

However, at the same time as they were cast as masculine agents against the femininity of the Italian terrain, the women sculptors sustained a particular identification with that landscape since they too, as socially constituted female subjects, were positioned under the sign of the feminine. In the gendered terms of narratological identities, the woman traveler to Italy was at once both masculine hero and feminine *topos*, a split and unstable subject sustaining a “double and multiple sense of belonging” — both to the masculinized, American sculptors and to the feminized spaces of Rome in which they worked.

It cannot be easy to pack both the identity of traveler and of terrain into one’s “subjective suitcase”, and indeed a heightened narratological tension can be traced in the representations of other heroic women ‘travelers’ sculpted by the American women. It was in the “in-between space” of their Roman studios that these two positionalities — the feminine *topos* of the journey, and its masculine goal of sculpture — met and came into conflict.<sup>5</sup>

In the *opera* of the women sculptors, we find a universal treatment of heroic women themes, and for many of the artists these were indeed the dominant narratives: Medusa, Ceres Mourning Persephone, Minnehaha, Evangeline, Eve, Miriam, Rebecca, Queen Isabella, Elizabeth of Siberia, to name just a few. Significantly, ideas of journey and transformation are always present either metaphorically or metonymically in these myths and legends. But equally significantly, their female figures are always contained both within the stories of journeying and transforming male heroes, and within the monumental forms, smooth surfaces, and homogenizing tendencies of the neoclassical style. Sometimes this containment is reinforced in the sculpture by particular symbols from the narrative, such that both the ideas of journey/transformation/achievement and of stasis/restraint/defeat co-exist in the sculpture. For example:

• the biblical *Hagar* spoke with God, and through her son, God made her the origin of a great nation. Yet in Edmonia Lewis’s representation we

see her as a slave, cast into the desert to die by her envious mistress.

- Harriet Hosmer's *Zenobia in Chains* : having conquered Syria, Bostra, and finally Asia Minor, her military acumen vied with that of the Emperor Aurelian for supremacy over all of the known world; but this artist represents Zenobia in defeat, paraded in chains through the streets of Rome as part of the triumphal procession.

- Similarly Elizabeth Ney's *Lady Macbeth*, one of the most dangerous and feared women in English literature, but shown in this artist's full-scale work at the hour of her defeat and psychological transformation.

These heroic, mythological and legendary women have had "strength enough to step out of the beaten track," yet they are also narrative *topoi* in their own turn, feminine obstacles carved in silent stone to be conquered by adventuring masculine heroes. And like the mythological and legendary women they modeled, the stories of the early women sculptors "have survived," as Teresa de Lauretis says, "inscribed in *hero* narratives, in someone else's story, not their own." But in their case, the hero narratives are those of art history. For too long only two positions have been available in art history to the American women sculptors: either a negated feminine one, as representatives of a sentimental art practice in the inferior 19th century neoclassical style; or the more positive but problematically masculine one, as "... worthy nineteenth-century prototype[s] for America's liberated women" (Tufts 88).

While the need to establish female genealogies and "matrilines" is as real and pressing today as it was for the "emancipated" women of the 19th century, it is essential to recognize the danger of choosing, as an opposite extreme from the traditional art historical rejection of women artists, to fuse with the subjects of our studies in a "ms.- identification".<sup>6</sup> It is not sufficient to simply resuscitate women artists as long-lost heroines and add them to the art historical paradigms that have long privileged the masculine narratives of "artist as hero". Rather, even as we excavate the forgotten and ignored histories of women artists, we must identify and challenge the gendered stratigraphies of art and art history — even and especially when the women artists themselves have been accomplices in the ranking of masculine over feminine, artist over model, tourist over native.

I would propose, then, that we seek to read between the either/or binary

logic of either being a sculptor/or being a woman, listening to the silence for the stories of an eloquent not-said. <sup>7</sup> As a signpost on our way in this different kind of journey, I would like to close with the words of another woman traveler, Isak Dinesen, from *her* story, “The Blank Page.”

Hear then: Where the story-teller is loyal, eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story, there, in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness. But we, the faithful, when we have spoken our last word, will hear the voice of silence (100).



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*Note, Notes, Anmerkungen*

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1) “... la nostra ipotesi di partenza: che esisteva nel viaggio una specificità femminile... Se mai, la specificità andava cercata in un duplice e molteplice senso di appartenza, in un accesso non ideologico al reale, nel concetto di ‘soggetto debole’ drammatizzato dalla figura di una viaggiatrice spaesata, incerta, non sincronica. Il nostro tipo di viaggiatrice potrebbe mettere in questione il concetto dell’io unitario e integrato, quindi la metafisica della presenza e, per estensione, della fissità dell’identità sessuata.” Liana Borghi, Nicoletta Livi Bacci, Anna Luppi, Milly Mazzei, Piera Palandri, “Viaggio intorno al Viaggio,” in *Viaggio e Scrittura: Le straniere nell’Italia dell’Ottocento*, ed. Liana Borghi, Nicoletta Livi Bacci, Uta Treder. Firenze: Libreria delle Donne, 1988, 11. Translation mine.

2) This is not to say, however, that there were no Italian or even Roman women sculptors in the 19th century. On the contrary, my research to date yields no fewer than ten Italian women sculptors active in the 19th century. However, within the context of the assertion quoted above, one might have expected a comment on Hosmer’s part about the relative absence of Italian women from her profession, and, indeed, from professions in general.

3) “...una sorta di oleografia, la riproduzione di un dipinto a cui mancasse la luminosità e la profondità dell’originale. L’oleografia, che simula l’intervento e l’originalità dell’artista, è stata paragonata storicamente all’immagine che dell’Italia e della cultura italiana hanno gli stranieri;

immagine che ha subito ben pochi mutamenti dalla fine dell'Ottocento a oggi." Translation mine.

4) "Le donne italiane, per esempio, venivano ignorate, sia come autrici che come attiviste politiche; l'interesse retorico si focalizzava sull'immagine dell'Italia come spazio femminile. E le donne italiane vivevano l' "Italia-intesa-come-donna" tanto quanto le attuali abitatrici di alcune isole dei Caraibi vivono la loro esistenza nei termini della romantica fuga ai Tropici suggerita dalle agenzie turistiche." Translation mine.

5) For a discussion of the space of the woman traveller as an 'in-between', see "Viaggio intorno al Viaggio," esp. p. 13, in *Viaggio e Scrittura*, op. cit.

6) References to the terms of 'rejection' and 'fusion' deployed by Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger in her work on matrixial symbolic relations are intentional and will be further developed in my future writings on this subject.

7) The idea of seeking the 'not-said' of 19th century women's travel narratives is pursued in *Viaggio e Scrittura*: "...alla logica binaria dell'Ottocento, dove tra l'o/o troppo spesso c'era il non-detto"(13).



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