

Women and Migration

Responses in Art and History

Women and Migration: Responses in Art and History

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GLOBAL INSTITUTE FOR
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25. Moving Mountains: Harriet Hosmer's Nineteenth-Century Italian Migration to Become the First Professional Woman Sculptor

Patricia Cronin

I first became interested in American neoclassical art when I was researching my monumental three-ton Carrara marble statue, *Memorial To A Marriage* (2002), which addressed marriage equality before gay marriage was legal anywhere in the United States. I used a 'nationalist' form, American neoclassical sculpture, to address a federal failure, the prohibition of same sex marriage.

Because the only legal protections available to homosexual couples were wills, healthcare proxies and power of attorney documents (depressing papers about our deterioration, incapacitation and death instead of a celebration our life together) I designed a mortuary double portrait sepulcher and permanently installed it on our burial plot in the place the Garden and Rural Cemetery Movement designed as America's Père Lachaise Cemetery, Woodlawn Cemetery, Bronx. Our tomb will be on view through eternity. Or as I tell my female artist friends — if you want permanent public art, you've got to buy the land.



Fig. 25.1 Patricia Cronin, *Memorial To A Marriage*, 2002. Carrara marble, over life size, photographed by Steven Bates. Courtesy of the artist.
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To make my first marble statue, I had to study the entire history of sculpture and, while combing through every tome, I stumbled across an extraordinary nineteenth-century marble sculpture of *Beatrice Cenci* (Fig. 25.2). I thought, 'that's strange, I don't know this one.' I looked at the bottom of the page and read the name, 'Harriet Hosmer.' I thought, 'hmmm, I've never heard of her.' I looked at it again and then wondered, 'WHY have I never heard of her?' I knew then and there she would be my next project. So, while I was thinking about my own death I discovered someone else's life.



Fig. 25.2 Patricia Cronin, *Beatrice Cenci*, 2007. Watercolor on paper, 12 x 15 inches.
After Harriet Hosmer, *Beatrice Cenci*, 1856. Courtesy of the artist.
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Harriet Hosmer was born in 1830 in Watertown, Massachusetts and lost her mother, two brothers and her sister to consumption before she was twelve years old. Her father Dr Hosmer, not wanting to risk losing his sole remaining family member, bought her a dog, a canoe, a gun and horse to inspire a strong, physically active outdoor lifestyle and then sent her to Miss Sedgwick's school in Lenox, Massachusetts for a

progressive education. These strategies worked well and Hosmer began to exhibit many of the vibrant personality traits she would become known for: a precocious prankster with a lively sense of humor, intense curiosity and boundless confidence. At that time all women were barred from attending college in the US so she was denied the anatomy courses necessary to carve realistic figurative neoclassical sculptures, which defined American art in the mid-nineteenth century. As a result, any woman who wanted to be a professional artist and practice her profession was forced to leave her birth country, and Hosmer migrated to Rome in 1852 when she was twenty-two years old. She apprenticed with the leading neoclassical sculptor at the time, British artist John Gibson, and within a few years struck out on her own and became known as the first professional woman sculptor.

Hosmer lived within a lively Anglo-American expatriate community of famous writers and artists, as well as a circle of 'independent women', internationally renowned actresses, artists and writers, who were never romantically involved with men. In her time, she had a prominent career, was critically acclaimed, financially successful, and exhibited in all the international exhibitions. She was infamous. Nathaniel Hawthorne even based the character of Hilda, from his 1860 novel *The Marble Faun*, on Hosmer. And yet she is largely unknown today.

This essay will consider how she created and maintained a critically acclaimed career, pushed the boundaries of acceptable female propriety to a degree that was inconceivable in the United States, including: owning a large studio workshop that employed over two dozen Italian workmen, adeptly handling jealous male competitors, and being involved in several long-term same-sex relationships. How was her work received then and now? Are there any lessons we can learn from her experiences that shed light on the plight of women artists today, 150 years later? As a contemporary artist, I wanted to create a series to reveal the complexities of Hosmer's career, reputation, and legacy.

In 1852 in Italy, it was scandalous for a woman to walk down the street unaccompanied by a male relative. Nonetheless, it was a liberating environment for women who were part of the English and American expatriate communities based in Rome and Florence, because they were freed from the restrictive behavioral norms of their birth countries and nor were they Italian, so they did not generally have to follow Italian social rules for women either. They were 'stranieri,'

strangers. For example, Hosmer famously irritated the Italian police corps, the *carabinieri*, by galloping her horse alone through the Villa Borghese Gardens.¹

Hosmer owned and ran an extensive artist's studio at Via Margutta 5 near the other male sculptors with a workshop full of assistants, as was usual practice to speed up production to satisfy a growing clientele. In a famous 1867 photograph, Hosmer is shown at the center surrounded by assistants who seem to fade away around her, while her arms are confidently folded as she directly engages the viewer's gaze. She is the only person without facial hair and you can see her *Fountain of the Siren* (1861) in the courtyard behind her. The photograph is astonishing because it documents the fact that this woman's creative production generated enough money to employ these two dozen men. This is particularly notable given that the role of Italian women was almost exclusively domestic, so the men's salaries had to support their entire families including wives and multiple children. Hosmer used photography to carefully craft her professional image, the size of the studio's production and the scale of her work. In an illustration, *Memorable Women of America: Harriet Hosmer in her Studio* from an unknown periodical, a wealthy American family visiting her studio as part of the Grand Tour is portrayed clandestinely peering from behind a curtain at the rare novelty of an American sculptress hard at work. Hosmer deftly used the proliferation of publishing at this time to publicize herself and her work. Usually it worked very well, increasing her fame, but it caused a backlash, which I shall discuss further.

She was infamous in her time; even today, her works are in some of the best museum collections in the world and yet she is largely unknown.

Who is written into history? Who is forgotten? Why, how and what are the conditions in which eradication can occur? How is value determined? These elements coalesce at the intersection of the ivory tower (scholarship) and the art market (sales) in the catalogue raisonné.

A catalogue raisonné is a critical scholarly archive of the complete artistic production of a single artist. It is the most prestigious book that can be written about an artist because it documents their every artwork,

1 Kate Culkin, *Harriet Hosmer: A Cultural Bibliography* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), pp. 31–32.

its exhibition, publication, and provenance (the succession of ownership and location) as well as art-historical research. When I started this project I could count on two hands the number of catalogues raisonné on women artists, of any nationality, in any language. Since a legitimate publisher wasn't going to hire a qualified art historian and pay them a salary for five to ten years, which is usually how long it takes to research and write a catalogue raisonné, I decided to make one for Hosmer.

I'm not an art historian; I just play one in my studio. In my *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found, A Catalogue Raisonné* (2009), each of Hosmer's neoclassical marble statues is represented by a monochromatic watercolor painted by hand, unlike the photographs an art historian would have requested from museums, to make visible that it is an artist who has taken on this enormous job. Otherwise the critiques of doctoral programs in art history, academic publishing and the art market, which are central to the project, are lost. Catalogue raisonnés usually read like phone books or dictionaries, but they don't have to. In addition to the usual catalogue raisonné texts, I've included my version of social art history at the end of each catalogue entry to form a fuller, more complete representation of the artist, the work and the context in which she created it.

The Clasped Hands of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1853), with whom Hosmer was close friends, is one of the few bronzes she made, and is on view in a period room in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They actually used to sell plaster copies in the Metropolitan Museum of Art gift shop next to the fake Degas horses. I haven't gone back in time and found a random female artist, liked her work, and think you should too. I'm saying I found the most famous female sculptor of the nineteenth century and frankly she was hidden in plain sight — in the Met gift shop! Why was it there when Hosmer was a largely forgotten nineteenth-century woman artist? Was it because of the well-known literary subjects, the romantic symbolism of marital fidelity in the clasped right hands, or the enclosed printed quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's famous love poem, 'How Do I Love They, Let Me Count The Ways'? This exemplifies the particular fragility of fame and fortune experienced by less powerful individuals.

The subjects of neoclassical sculpture were generally taken from the Bible, Greek myths, history and literature. Hosmer's popular 'fancy

piece' for parlor rooms, *Puck on a Toad Stool* (1856) (Fig. 25.3) was inspired by William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In the 1850s Hosmer was selling these for \$800–\$1200 each. There are more than thirty known versions. But Dr. William H. Gerdtz said, 'if Hosmer said she made thirty, she made sixty!'² Well-to-do English and Americans in Rome on the Grand Tour would visit their compatriots abroad and purchase these marble sculptures as high-end souvenirs to be sent back home to show their sophistication, refinement and worldliness.



Fig. 25.3 Patricia Cronin, *Puck*, 2007. Watercolor on paper, 15 x 12 inches. After Harriet Hosmer, *Puck*, 1855. Courtesy of the artist. All rights reserved.

Moreover, as we know, the subject position of the creator of a work of art makes a huge difference to the work itself, as exemplified by Hosmer's resistance to the dominant male narrative in art. An early example is Hosmer's *Beatrice Cenci* (1856) (see Fig. 25.2), the work that first caught my eye. Hosmer depicted Cenci during a moment of peace in her Castel Sant'Angelo prison cell the night before Pope Clement VII ordered her execution for murdering her incestuous father, Count Francesco Cenci, in 1599. This establishes Hosmer's interest in the subject of a woman seeking justice for herself while maintaining her dignity, even in the face of death.

² Conversation with the author, 25 September 2007.

Another milestone in Hosmer's rising success was her winning the commission of the *Tomb of Judith Falconnet* (1857–58) (Fig. 25.4) sculpture in the Church of Sant' Andrea delle Fratte near the Spanish Steps where the expatriate community worshiped. It is the first work of art by an American artist, male or female, permanently installed in a Roman church. Death wasn't an abstraction for Hosmer. Her sister Helen died at fourteen years old and within a decade Hosmer was sculpting the sixteen-year old Judith's body on the tomb with solemn sensitivity. Her 'brethren sculptors',³ as she called them, weren't threatened by the ladies 'patting their clay',⁴ as the men called it, until she started winning prestigious and lucrative mortuary commissions like the *Tomb of Judith Falconnet* instead of them.

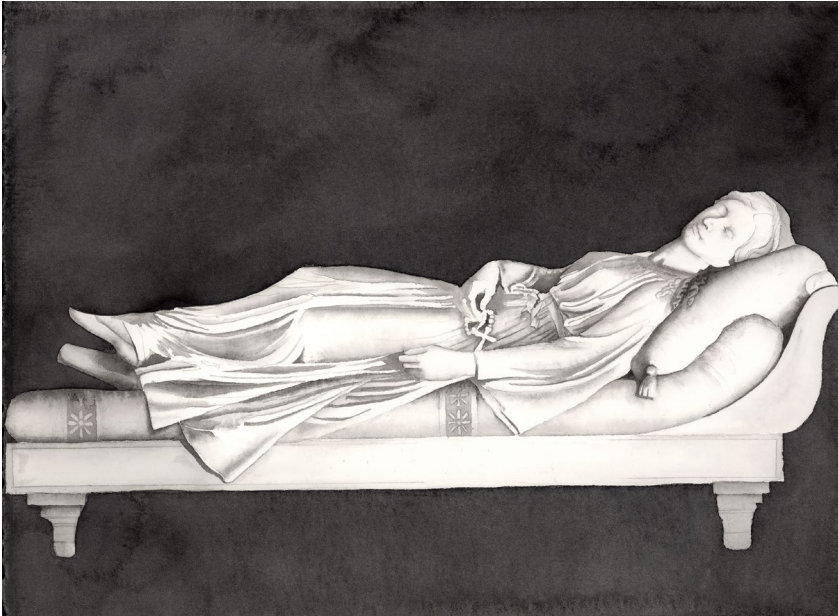


Fig. 25.4 Patricia Cronin, *Tomb of Judith Falconnet*, 2006. Watercolor on paper, 12 x 15 inches. After Harriet Hosmer, *Tomb of Judith Falconnet*, 1857–58. Courtesy of the artist. All rights reserved.

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- 3 Harriet Hosmer, 'The Process of Sculpture', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 14:86 (1864), 734–37.
 - 4 Harriet Hosmer, 'The Doleful Ditty of the Roman Caffè Greco', *Evening Transcript* (Boston), 17 November 1864, p. 1.



Fig. 25.5 Patricia Cronin, *Zenobia*, 2007. Watercolor on paper, 15 x 12 inches. After Harriet Hosmer, *Zenobia*, 1859. Courtesy of the artist. All rights reserved.

Hosmer's *Zenobia* (1859) (Fig. 25.5) depicting the third-century-CE ruler of Palmyra is another example of Hosmer choosing different subjects than her male counterparts. The tragic story of Cleopatra, who committed suicide when conquered by Octavian, the future Roman Emperor Augustus, was a popular theme with them. Hosmer chose a different queen. Zenobia co-ruled present-day Syria with her husband, King Odaenathus, until his assassination in 267 CE. She then ruled alone for seven years in proxy for her four-year-old son, conquering Egypt and much of Asia Minor. In 274 CE she was finally defeated by the Roman Emperor Aurelian, taken to Rome as a war trophy, and marched through the streets in chains. Hosmer depicts a regal woman, a queen in crisis, but still dignified; the heavy gold chains appear like weightless jewelry as opposed to an unbearable burden. Zenobia appealed to Hosmer as a subject because she was a well-educated, experienced military leader and a diplomat. Emperor Aurelian planned to execute her, but she used her diplomatic skills, talked him out of it, married a Roman nobleman, had several more children and lived out the rest of her life in Tivoli. This is in stark contrast to the male artists' representations of Cleopatra's eroticized final act of killing herself.

Word of Hosmer's monumental *Zenobia* quickly attracted admirers, as evidenced in an 1859 *Harper's Weekly* article 'Miss Hosmer's Studio at Rome' with an illustration of the Prince of Wales visiting her studio. John Gibson is depicted explaining the merits of Hosmer's work to the prince and Hosmer is drawn diminutively and silently to the side. A senior male mentor and sculptor was needed to vouch for a woman's work — no matter how obviously skillfully executed, ambitiously scaled and thoughtfully composed. And it worked: the prince became an enthusiastic supporter and purchased several sculptures, including a *Puck* marble that he installed in his room at Oxford. Nathaniel Hawthorne was the first to compare *Zenobia* to the *Athena Giustiniani*, a Roman copy of the late-fifth/early-fourth-century BCE Greek statue (the goddess of wisdom and war), and the Barberini *Juno*, a sixteenth-century copy of a Greek statue (the queen of the Olympian gods) that Hosmer would have known and that was on view in the Vatican Museums.

Then Hosmer, still the most well-known and renowned female sculptor of the period, made a grave 'mistake'. She entered her *Zenobia* sculpture along with *Puck* and *Medusa* in the 1862 London Exhibition, attended by over six million people. It was an instantaneous critical

success and a scandal immediately ensued. Hosmer's less celebrated male rivals were furious a woman was overshadowing them and they spread a rumor that she hadn't made *Zenobia* herself, but that it was the work of one of her Italian assistants. They widely circulated the rumor and published it in *The Queen* newspaper and then reprinted it in the *Art Journal* (London).⁵ Hosmer had long heard the disparaging gossip of her jealous male competitors, but this was different. The accusation was intended to halt her growing reputation and ruin her career.

Hosmer fought back swiftly at a time when most women couldn't raise their voices and in a way nobody imagined: first, she filed a lawsuit claiming damages of 1000 pounds and then, publicly, in print, spoke the truth. She adeptly rallied her successful male allies from Hiram Powers to Nathaniel Hawthorne to write publicly on her behalf; the paper that had printed the lies published a retraction and a lukewarm apology.⁶ She wrote an article, 'The Process of Sculpture,' published in 1864 in *The Atlantic Monthly*,⁷ which infuriated her male counterparts because it lifted the veil on the fact that all sculptors used assistants as keeping with the historic traditions and necessities of sculpture. Then *The New York Evening Post* published her riotous poem, 'The Doleful Ditty of the Roman Caffè Greco,'⁸ depicting male artists at a popular watering hole and gathering place for the expatriate Roman art community bemoaning their competition with the lady sculptors; the poem ridiculed their fragile male egos. Hosmer assured herself of the last laugh when *Zenobia* went on to an extremely successful American tour to sellout crowds in New York, Boston and Philadelphia.

This particular story resonates with many women artists, including myself.

At the same time that I was asking how Hosmer could be erased from art history, an unsuccessful older heterosexual male artist perpetrated an academic vendetta against me that provoked me to stand up for myself using legal action, and sparked a creative writing project of my own. Since all the characters in Hosmer's scandal are so historically significant, I wrote *The Zenobia Scandal: A Meditation on Male Jealousy* (2013) to tell an amazing story of female resilience not in my words but

5 'Obituary: Mr. Albert Gatley', *Art Journal*, 1 September 1863, p. 181.

6 Culkin, *Harriet Hosmer*, pp. 76–77.

7 Hosmer, 'The Process of Sculpture'.

8 Idem, 'The Doleful Ditty of the Roman Caffè Greco'.

by sequencing the exact words of Hosmer's colleagues, critics, friends and foes alike — and most importantly, Hosmer's own words. I was dumbfounded by the degree to which it mirrored what I was going through 150 years later. Fear not! I got the last laugh too!

Hosmer bravely continued stepping outside culturally acceptable behavior for women, as seen with *The Sleeping Faun* (1864–65) (Fig. 25.6). She cleverly counterbalanced the sensuality of the languorous, virtually nude male faun (sculpted when it was truly scandalous for women to be exposed to any nude models, male or female) with the humor of the devilishly busy hands of the baby satyr playing a prank by tying the lion skin around the unsuspecting, drunk or sleeping faun. It is also rumored to be a self-portrait. This gender-blurring in 1865 is nothing short of astonishing. According to her own writing and that of her lovers, Hosmer was only romantically linked to women and had a relationship with every noble woman she could get her hands on, including a twenty-five-year relationship with Lady Louisa Ashburton that took place after a lengthy affair with Lady Marian Alford and non-royals like Matilda Hays and Emma Stebbins, among others.



Fig. 25.6 Patricia Cronin, *The Sleeping Faun*, 2006. Watercolor on paper, 12 x 15 inches. After Harriet Hosmer, *The Sleeping Faun*, 1865. Courtesy of the artist. All rights reserved.

Hosmer's archive is in the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College at Harvard. Many of her handwritten letters have significant portions cut out of them. If you hold them up to the light they look like Swiss cheese. Hosmer entrusted her letters and archive to her lifelong childhood friend from Mrs Sedgwick's school, Cornelia Crow Carr, who censored Hosmer's lesbian life to 'protect' her reputation. But Hosmer's British friends weren't concerned about their romantic relationships. Lady Ashburton's archive is located in the National Library of Scotland and the letters are all intact; many of them feature erotic overtones like this one: 'I do hope you will make your figure agreeable to me again as promised!'⁹

To interpret another artist's work is a huge responsibility, but the biggest challenge was to visually represent an object I couldn't see in the catalogue raisonné. One Hosmer statue, which the *Art Journal* called her crowning achievement, is now lost: the life-size marble statue of the last *Queen of Naples* (1868). Hosmer liked female subjects, sovereigns in particular. Maria Sophia, the last queen of Naples, was a Bourbon royal who had just lost the war against Italian Unification led by Garibaldi. The queen posed for a year and a half in Hosmer's Roman studio and several scholars believe they had a love affair during this time. The location of the sculpture is unknown and there is no visual documentation of it; however, there are many written descriptions published in the *Art Journal* and unpublished letters written by people on the Grand Tour, all contradictory. For the catalogue raisonné I wanted to give presence to Hosmer's absence, not reinscribe her absence. And having made a three-ton marble statue, I still don't understand how you could lose something that big.

I moved to Rome in 2006 for the Rome Prize fellowship at the American Academy in Rome to work on my Hosmer project. I traced her footsteps, visited her old studio on Via Margutta and her former residences where she lived with many like-minded women, friends and lovers, at 28 Via del Corso and then at 38 Via Georgiana. I studied her Falconnet tomb and did research at the Vatican. Being surrounded by Catholicism, majestic opulent churches, mysticism, stories of miracles and saints' lives, and shards of light streaming into the churches, helped me shape the answer: an apparition, a ghost image for a phantom sculpture, a

9 Harriet Hosmer, 'Lady Ashburton', Ashburton Papers, undated (Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1996), Acc.11388-153.

missing statue. I then realized it wasn't just one lost sculpture; it was a whole lost career. So I started making watercolors of ghost images (Fig. 25.7) and interspersed them with the statue watercolors. Ghost, statue, ghost, statue, ghost. And then she disappeared.

I love art history but I want to rewrite it to include people who are more like me, and also to create a space larger than my reality. There are many lessons we can learn from Harriet Hosmer's life and career including aesthetic skill, bold subject choices, determination and courage to practice our profession. As a contemporary artist, I sought to have my *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found, A Catalogue Raisonné* series to act as a future form of nostalgia that addresses the failures of seeing the feminist lesbian body in real time.



Fig. 25.7 Patricia Cronin, *Queen of Naples*, 2007. Watercolor on paper, 15 x 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist. All rights reserved.

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