

ZENOBIA: EMPRESS OF THE EAST

EXPLORING ZENOBIA'S WORLD. THE INCREDIBLE RISE AND FALL OF THE CITY OF PALMYRA

10 JULY 2009

Zenobia Lost and Found (updated)

Is this is the little woman who made the big statue?

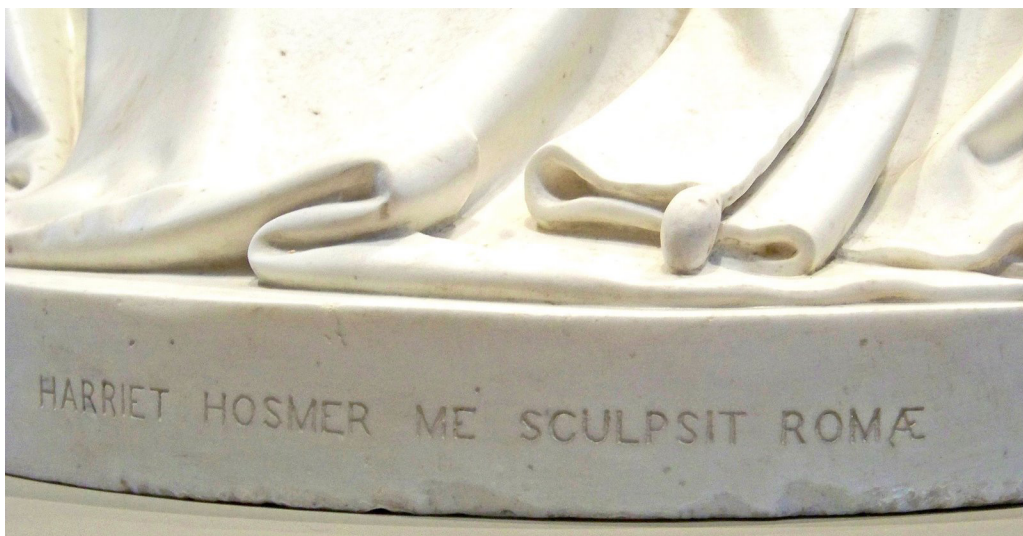


I have written about **Zenobia In Chains**, the monumental marble statue of Queen Zenobia which was recently installed at the Huntington Library (The Huntington Makes Space -- For Zenobia) -- and, a year earlier, about Harriet Hosmer, the sculptor who created this great icon (Zenobia is Back in America).

Hosmer was the artistic leader of the “White Marmorean Flock” in Rome (a quip by Henry James), a circle of strong-minded, mostly expatriate, and fiercely independent female artists. Hosmer lived as a professional sculptor, working in the neoclassical style of the time. She had patrons in Italy and in America and won some sculptural commissions against all-male competition

-- no mean feat in the middle of the 19th century.

Zenobia In Chains (1859) was the first of Hosmer's three celebrated large-scale statues of female sovereigns. The second (1868) was a portrait from life of her friend (and rumoured lover), Maria Sophia, a Bourbon princess who became the last **Queen of Naples**. Unfortunately for the commission, the queen and King Francis II had to flee into exile when Garibaldi tossed them out of Naples on his way to re-unifying Italy. The third queen was another larger-than-life statue of **Isabella of Castile**. Hosmer imagined her as a co-discoverer of the New World, and pictured her “Giving Her Jewels to Columbus” to finance his epic voyage of exploration.



We'll come back to the three queens in a moment. But first, let's look at what's written on the under-carriage of our Zenobia statue:

Harriet Hosmer Me Sculpsit Romae.



No she didn't. She didn't sculpt the statue of Zenobia that is pictured left.

And, no, I'm not repeating the slander that this 'little woman' couldn't possibly have made such a big statue. When Hosmer exhibited **Zenobia** at the International Exhibition in London in 1862, critics swore that a man must have carved it. Females didn't have the power of hand and arm (still less the brains) to sculpt such a monument. The little woman surely put her name on a man's work. She sued for libel and won.

That shut them up.

So why am I saying that she didn't sculpt it?

Because it's not a marble statue at all. It's a watercolour.

And not over-life-size 7' (2.13 m) tall, but a small 15 x 12" (38 x 26 cm) piece of paper.

Oh, and not by Hosmer but by Patricia Cronin.

Who?

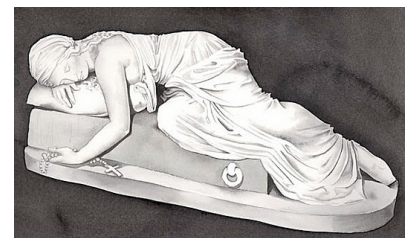
Patricia Cronin at the Brooklyn Museum

Cronin's Harriet Hosmer show -- which opened on 5 June 2009 at the Brooklyn Museum -- is a complex package of conceptual art: a total work that is also a historical document of the careers of two female artists, past and present, and a self-referential program meant to secure the visibility of both artists over time.

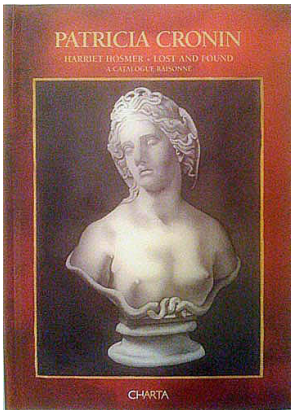
Cronin is well known as a conceptual artist. Her erotic watercolors from the early 1990s invited the viewer to witness intimate moments between herself and her partner, the painter Deborah Kass. Her three-ton marble, larger than life-size, mortuary marker, *Memorial to a Marriage* (2002), used the style of classical sculpture to depict herself and her lover locked in an embrace. *Memorial to a Marriage* is permanently installed at their future burial plot in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.

Cronin began researching the history of sculpture in order to make her own tomb monument:

While combing through every tome on sculpture, I stumbled across two statues I had never seen before. They were extraordinary. One was of Beatrice Cenci [right] and the other was the Tomb of Judith Falconnet . I fell in love. I looked at the artist's name ... and read the words "Harriet Hosmer." I said out loud, "Hmmm, I've never heard of her." And then wondered, "WHY had I never heard of her?" I knew then and there she would be my next project.



Who Gets Written into History? Who is forgotten?



Over five years (including a year in Rome), Cronin located most of Hosmer's known works, documented their current locations, and painted a watercolour of each. The result of the project has just been installed in the Brooklyn Museum's Herstory Gallery and Forum.* Cronin's black-and-white watercolours are accompanied by a Harriet Hosmer catalogue raisonné (a book that comprehensively lists an artist's complete works), in which each of Hosmer's statues is represented by a watercolour painted by Cronin. Together, they constitute a document of -- and homage to -- Hosmer's work.

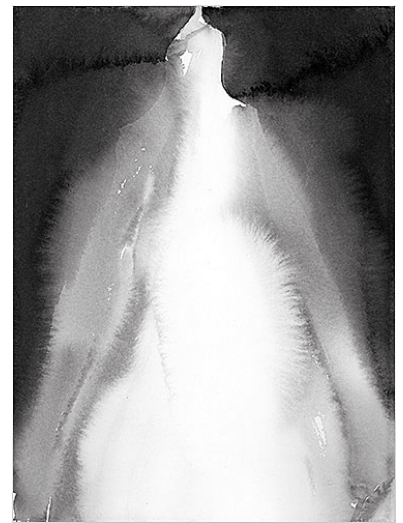
In *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found*,** Cronin plays biographer, art historian, and artist. As biographer and art historian, she researched every one of the 62 works that Hosmer is known to have produced, from her first original sculpture of 1852 to her last in 1893. The complete set of paintings, arranged in chronological sequence, is reproduced in the catalogue along with scholarly data about each sculpture and commentary by Cronin.

Then the artist takes over. Cronin painted all the sculptures that are extant or that survive in printed reproduction, each statue turned into a small monochrome watercolour:

Because of its transparent properties, watercolor is the perfect medium to represent the luminosity of marble -- how light penetrates the surface of marble, swirls around about an inch below the surface before it bounces back out.

In her research, Cronin also found written references to a handful of Hosmer pieces that do not appear to have ever been photographed. To represent these sculptures, she has made watercolours of what she calls "ghosts"—vague, formless, and ethereal images of sculptures that may exist somewhere in the world, but are lost to art history.

That's what happened to the **Queen of Naples** (right), a life-size marble statue idealizing the queen's most heroic moment when she led her troops against Garibaldi on the battlefield. That's why Hosmer was said to have pictured her wearing a long billowing military cape. Although the queen lost the battle, her bravery under fire made her a cult figure among the female aristocracy. But where is her statue? It was last seen in 1891 at Castle Ashby, the home of the 7th Marquess of Northampton, in England. Now this sculpture (which had been called Hosmer's masterpiece, her crowning achievement) has been revived as one of Cronin's 'ghosts', an apparition with a phantom aura.



It was a great way to talk about [Hosmer's] 'missing' or 'lost' career. It's not just one statue missing but a whole career.

The fact that Harriet Hosmer has been all but forgotten, save by a few art historians, formed the inspiration for Patricia Cronin's investigation into her life and work. Cronin views this project as not only the re-evaluation of the work of another artist, but as a meditation on her own fate in the future of art

history.

Doing a reclamation-type project like I'm doing, the whole point is that she was so well-known, so well-respected in her time. It's not like I found somebody that nobody knew and am saying this was an important artist. This was the most important artist in her day and she's forgotten. It's a great way to talk about the plight of being a woman artist. Unfortunately not that much has changed. But it won't stop me.

This is Hosmer's art as seen through the eyes and hand of another woman and artist.

If I'm trying to make the case for what a great artist she was, I needed to show the breadth and whole scope of her work, said Cronin.



Left: Medusa by Harriet Hosmer (1854). Right Medusa by Patricia Cronin (2006).

In Greek mythology, the beautiful mortal woman, Medusa, angers the goddess Athena by sleeping with (or being raped by) Poseidon. Athena retaliates by changing her hair into a mass of wriggling serpents. Now her appearance becomes so monstrous that men who get even a glimpse of her are literally turned to stone, a power she retains even after she is beheaded by the hero Perseus.



In Hosmer's version, however, despite her snaky hair, she is still beautiful and still embodied (even a bit sexy, with her bare breasts). Perhaps it is the moment of the transformation. Her expression is not one of frightfulness but of sorrow for her fate. Another wronged woman, in fact.

Cronin's Medusa is an idealized version of almost photographic accuracy. Nonetheless, one sees the sleight of a modern hand in picturing the gaunter face of a woman who is suffering and a slight emphasis on her nipples which inevitably gives a sexual charge to the image.

Hosmer would have loved it.

Cronin's watercolours seem to add a shade of vulnerability and pathos to what is left of Hosmer's fame, but they also, by their very existence, seek to restore her predecessor's glory.

Glory is, of course, unpredictable. The Metropolitan Museum of Art owns a version of Hosmer's 'Daphne' -- the first sculpture that Hosmer made in Rome at the beginning of her career there -- but hasn't included the piece among the sculptures displayed in its recently revamped American Wing. You'll have to go down into the vaults if you want to see her.

Or better yet, go and contemplate Cronin's watercolour of 'Daphne' in the Brooklyn Museum.

The Museum show marks the first time these paintings, for which Cronin has won the Rome Prize in 2007, will be on public view. If you can't possibly make it to Brooklyn, I highly recommend Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found, the catalogue with all of Cronin's watercolours and her extensive commentary on each work, which has just been published by Charta Press.



Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?

With her Hosmer project, Cronin is highlighting the canon of art history's exclusions and inclusions.

When I'm again in New York in December, I'll certainly visit the Herstory Gallery (the show runs until 24 January 2010), and join in this meditation on mortality, legacy, and remembrance.

And visit my Zenobia in Chains in another guise.
Oh, by the way, this is Hosmer's Zenobia pictured here.

UPDATE 24 SEPTEMBER 2009:

Patricia Cronin: Artist Talk and Book Signing

First Saturday Celebration at the Brooklyn Museum, Free Admission:

Date: Saturday, October 3, 2009
Time: 6:00pm - 7:00pm
Location: Brooklyn Museum
Street: 200 Eastern Parkway
City: Brooklyn, NY

* The Herstory Gallery is dedicated to exhibitions that elaborate on the 1,038 women who are named in Judy Chicago's iconic feminist artwork 'The Dinner Party', installed in the adjacent space. Harriet Hosmer's name appears on the Heritage Floor, near the place setting for Georgia O'Keeffe. See my post on 'The Dinner Party' at Hatshepsut Meets Judy Chicago.

** Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found is published by Charta Press, Milano/New York.

Illustrations

Top left: Portrait of Harriet Hosmer, about 1854–57, by William Page (1811–1885). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Lucien Carr, 1922).

Top centre: Inscription on Zenobia in Chains at The Huntington. Credit: Anja-Leigh Russell and I am most grateful to her for sending me this photograph.

Middle left: Zenobia in Chains by Patricia Cronin (1859, 2007). Watercolour on paper. Credit: courtesy of the artist.

Middle right: Beatrice Cenci by Patricia Cronin (1856, 2007). Watercolour on paper. Credit: courtesy of the artist.

Below left: Medusa, marble by Harriet Hosmer (about 1854). Hood Museum, Dartmouth College (Purchased through a gift from Jane and W. David Dance).

Below right: Medusa by Patricia Cronin (1854, 2006). Watercolour on paper. Credit: courtesy of the artist.

Lowest left: Zenobia in Chains at The Huntington. Credit: Anja-Leigh Russell. I am again most grateful to her for this photograph.

Illustrations right: Queen Isabella of Castille by Patricia Cronin (1893, 2007). Watercolour on paper. Credit: courtesy of the artist.

read this article : <http://judithweingarten.blogspot.com/2009/07/zenobia-lost-and-found.html>

