1994

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Recommended Citation
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The Public Career of Emma Stebbins: Work in Bronze

ELIZABETH MILROY

WRITING ON THE EVE OF THEIR EMBARKATION for Europe in July 1861, after one of her periodic visits to the United States, the actress Charlotte Cushman confided to her nephew’s wife that her companion Emma Stebbins was negotiating for an important public sculpture commission in the United States:

Aunt Em has got an order for a full-sized statue of Commodore Perry for the New York Central Park but of this you must say nothing yet. There has been a politician on board too, one of the commissioners of the Central Park who is going to try and put through the fountain which you may remember she sketched... So if she gets these orders she will have enough to do for nearly five years. Won’t this be grand. Don’t say anything about it for it only makes unnecessary jealousies. Don’t tell Mary for I don’t want Hattie [Hosmer] to know of it.¹

The well-received exhibition of her marble statues at Goupil’s New York gallery earlier in the year had broadened the audience for Stebbins’s work in sculpture. Visitors to the exhibition ordered copies of several...
of the marble table-top figures included in the show; and Stebbins was approached about undertaking public monuments in bronze. By the end of 1861 she was actually engaged in negotiations for three important commissions: a single-figure monument to Horace Mann for the State House in Boston; a second single-figure monument to the naval hero Commodore Matthew Perry for New York’s Central Park; and a multifigured composition to decorate the fountain at the Seventy-second Street Terrace, also in Central Park. She eventually completed two of the three projects, the Mann monument and the Bethesda Fountain.

In this second part of my study of Stebbins’s public career, I shall discuss the history of these three commissions. Commission negotiations and the progress of work on all three projects were difficult and protracted. Though Stebbins’s designs were readily accepted, patrons disputed or delayed payment. As she worked on these projects, the artist’s already fragile health deteriorated, exacerbated by a series of accidents and stress caused by the worsening health, from 1869 on, of her beloved companion Cushman. Most distressing to Stebbins, however, were the increasing tensions between her two greatest supporters: her brother Henry Stebbins and Charlotte Cushman.

Emma Stebbins’s trip to New York late in 1860 coincided with completion of the first phase of construction of the city’s new Central Park. Discussions of the Park must have dominated the Stebbins household at this time, because Emma’s older brother Henry, a successful banker and stockbroker, was a Park commissioner. Indeed, in May 1860 he was named chairman of the Committee on Statuary, Fountains, and Architectural Structures. As Mary Stebbins Garland recalled in her unpublished biography of her sister, Henry was a devoted supporter of Emma’s early artistic endeavors: his house was decorated with her paintings, and as the head of the family he must initially have approved her move to Rome. Doubtless Henry lobbied for the Perry and Bethesda Fountain commissions.

In their winning Greensward Plan, Frederick Law Olmsted and his design partner Calvert Vaux envisioned Central Park as a “natural” landscape composed of sequences of picturesque vistas. Noting “that the interest of the visitor, who in the best sense is the true owner [of the Park], should concentrate on features of natural, in preference to artificial, beauty,” the designers stated flatly in their original plan that buildings, flower-gardens, architectural terraces, and fountains were unnecessary in the Park. Olmsted and Vaux did, however, allow that such structures might be introduced, but only after the “natural” components of the
Park (such as drives, greensward, and shade) were established, and only if surplus funds were used to pay for these structures.\(^5\)

The Park commissioners initially supported these strictrues on changes or additions to Olmsted’s and Vaux’s design, but maintaining this policy proved difficult. Despite Olmsted’s dislike of the “intrusion” of decorative sculpture or other architectural structures into his park, he did not actively oppose the mounting wishes of New Yorkers, including some members of the Park commission itself, to contribute in some material way to its embellishment. Contradictory statements in the commissioners’ third annual report (1860) reflect their dilemma. Acknowledging public eagerness to establish institutions that might afford “the means of popular cultivation and innocent recreation,” such as observation points, botanical gardens, or museums of art, the commissioners expressed doubt about the propriety of the commission’s financing the construction of such buildings in the Park, because the mandate of the commission was confined to the construction, maintenance, and regulation of the site itself. “The Board would probably be authorized to provide a suitable structure, within which donations of works of art might be deposited and protected, but it would not long be tolerated that the Board should expend the public moneys in the purchase of such works.”\(^6\)

At the same time the commissioners also expressed hope that private individuals would volunteer the money needed to erect appropriate sculptural monuments, and in the same report, it was announced that permission had been granted to Park commissioner August Belmont to erect a monument to naval hero Commodore Perry, his father-in-law. To justify this authorization, the commissioners asserted that the Perry monument would embody the national as well as local significance of New York’s new park: “To its intimate commercial relations with all parts of the Union, the city owes its unprecedented advance, wealth and population. It is fit that the virtues of heroes and statesmen, whose fame is the common heritage of the country, should, in this crowning work of its metropolis, find appropriate commemoration.”\(^7\)

Belmont first had offered the Perry commission to Paul Akers, with whom Stebbins studied for a short time after her arrival in Rome. Akers, who during the summer of 1860 had returned to his native Portland, Maine, because of ill health, died the following spring.\(^8\) Two months after his death, Charlotte Cushman wrote to a friend of Akers, inquiring about a letter Stebbins had written in which she requested, “some statistics or data which was in the possession of Paul from which he was to model the statue of Commodore Perry.”\(^9\) This suggests that Stebbins received the commission from Belmont at the request of or in remembrance of her teacher.

Word of the Mann project arrived in July 1861, just as Stebbins and Cushman were leaving New York harbor, when Stebbins received a letter from Elizabeth Peabody, Horace Mann’s sister-in-law, asking to whom
the Mann Memorial Committee should send the photograph of Mann from which Stebbins could fashion her portrait statue.\textsuperscript{10} This was a project in which Cushman, a native Bostonian, had taken some interest and she was determined that Stebbins should win the commission.\textsuperscript{11}

The resolution proposing erection of a monument to the politician and educator Horace Mann (1796–1859) had been passed by the Massachusetts legislature in October 1859, one month after Hiram Powers’s statue of Daniel Webster was unveiled on the State House lawn.\textsuperscript{12} The committee applying for the Mann memorial intended the statue to be a pendant to the Webster. It also expressed an interest in finding a female sculptor to execute the work, in memory of Mann’s advocacy of female education. Cushman learned of this when she was in Boston on her 1860–1861 tour, and she probably mentioned Stebbins to her influential acquaintances, the sisters Elizabeth Peabody and Mary Peabody Mann.\textsuperscript{13}

Back in Rome, by the autumn of 1861 Stebbins set to work on the Mann and Perry designs. It was required for both that she submit drawings and make clay models of the standing figures, photographs of which would be shown to the patrons for consideration before either commission was formally authorized. No photographs of the Perry figure survive, but Cushman reported in January 1862 that Belmont had hired Stebbins after seeing her design (probably a drawing) in the late fall.\textsuperscript{14} During the same period she also finished and had photographed the sketch of Horace Mann, but when she encountered difficulty in reaching agreement about methods of payment with the Mann committee, Stebbins reconsidered the project. Cushman reported their concern:

\textit{Don’t let them know that she is not going on with the statue and has only sent them the photograph as an indication that she has not been idle in their cause. If they approve of it, she ought to ask for a portion of the money—Hattie [Hosmer] received $2500 on her Benton before she touched a tool and before she left America. I think Aunt Emma should have $1000 of the money paid now—a thousand when she sends it to the caster and the remainder when the work is finished.}\textsuperscript{15}

If word was not forthcoming from Samuel Howe, the chairman of the Mann committee in Boston, Stebbins intended to devote her time to the Perry and postpone

work on the *Horace Mann* until the following year. But a letter from Howe arrived in late January 1862 urging the sculptor to work with as much speed as possible, and at this time she apparently abandoned the *Perry*.\(^{16}\) No doubt Cushman had some influence in this decision. Stebbins reversed her plan to give up the *Mann* in order to work on the *Perry* even though she was dissatisfied with her model for the *Mann*. In a letter of January 15, 1862, Cushman called the *Perry* sketch "splendid, a great improvement on the Mann, though she will improve that greatly in the large one."\(^{17}\) Notwithstanding Cushman's or Stebbins's own reservations
about the Horace Mann, other observers admired it, and Cushman was quite excited about a project to embellish her native city. She wrote further in another letter:

Herr Müller, the founder, says "as far as I can judge from the photograph this statue is very finely conceived and is the work of a lady truly wonderful. It is a pity that the artist is likely to receive so small a pecuniary reward for her labors. . . . "How I do hope Dr. Howe will be able to raise the subscription to $4000 and then it will go on at once. . . . Emma has written to him to say that she does not wish to have her brother or friends drawn upon for any portion of this and asks for him to try to get the $4000—we wait his answer."18

Cushman and Stebbins may have suspected that many people probably assumed Stebbins’s sculptural pursuits were the diversions of a well-heeled amateur who did not need financial recompense. As Cushman’s comments reveal, Stebbins was especially concerned that she be regarded as independent of her brother Henry. But this was difficult, if not impossible, because at the same time she was working on the Mann, Stebbins was developing the Bethesda Fountain, a second monument for Central Park that had probably been won through her brother’s efforts.

Most notable among Calvert Vaux’s architectural designs for Central Park was a long, tree-lined formal promenade or mall extending a quarter mile from the first transverse road, at Sixty-fifth Street, to a terrace at Seventy-second Street that overlooked the Skating Pond. Olmsted and Vaux justified the Promenade as a walking path designed to bring the visitor into closer communion with the natural beauties of the Park. From the Terrace, Park visitors could view Vista Rock, the central promontory at which the upper and lower Park areas were joined.19

By 1860 Vaux was engaged in elaborating and refining the architecture of the Terrace, a vaulted arcade through which the pedestrian walk continued from the Promenade under the Seventy-second Street carriage path to end at the Lower Terrace by the Skating Pond; flanking the arcade were two grand staircases leading down from the carriage path. At the center of the Lower Terrace was a circular fountain basin. In May of that year, a description of the project was published in the New York Times:

One of the most attractive points of the Park will be the main terrace which crosses the main drive through a tunnel at the upper end of the Mall. Already this massive work—the largest architectural work in the Park—is in an advanced state. . . . When the mosaic pavement and ceiling are completed, the fountain in the pond immediately in front, the six swans, which are to be presented by the City of Hamburg to the City of New York, located—and the foliage fully developed in the distance—the scene from this point will be one of the finest in the Park.20

Cushman’s letter of July 1861 records that Stebbins already had submitted drawings for the fountain by the time the women embarked for Europe. Thenceforth, Stebbins’s communications with the Park commissioners paralleled Calvert Vaux’s progress on finalizing the decorative program of the Terrace architecture—a project on which he collaborated with designer Jacob Wrey Mould. Vaux described the design program for the Terrace in a special chapter of the commissioners’ annual report for 1863. According to Vaux, the purpose of the Terrace was both practical and artistic, satisfying “special requirements of public convenience” and “without any attempt at grandeur or severity to express an earnest general idea… at the same time… [being] as full of playful suggestion and liberal decoration in detail as the nature of the case will admit.” Vaux’s projected designs included a series of statues to be placed on the pillars of the stairway and Upper Terrace, and he expressed hope that private donors might provide the necessary means “to enable eminent artists to fill the vacant pedestals with their appropriate decoration.” He suggested figures of the Seasons (for the intermediate pillars on the north stairs); personifications of sunlight, moonlight, twilight, and starlight (south stairs), and of the mountain, valley, river, and lake (pairs at each arm of the descending paths from the Upper Terrace); and allegories of Science and Art (at the Pond), and Nature (the figures of Flora, Pomona, Sylva, and Ceres in a group under the arcade). Photographs in Stebbins’s scrapbook of single figures depicting the Seasons (apparently clay maquettes) suggest that she also developed designs for the Terrace figures.21

The fountain on the Lower Terrace provided a dramatic accent to the central areas of the Park, wedding the man-made promenade of the Mall and Terrace with the natural landscape. Though he noted that the fountain will be “finished above the upper water level in bronze,” Vaux does not specify the form of these embellishments, noting only that the planned decoration of the fountain is intended to express “both earnestly and playfully the idea of that central spirit of ‘Love’ that is forever active, and forever bringing nature, science and art, summer and winter, youth and age, day and night, into harmonious accord.”22 But a lithograph of the Terrace and Skating Pond, published with Vaux’s report, shows the addition of the statues designed by Stebbins installed on the fountain superstructure. Set atop the middle basin and supporting the top basin (also designed by Stebbins) are four cherubs, representing health, purity, peace, and temperance, flanked by bulrushes. Alighting at the center of the uppermost basin is the over-lifesize figure of an angel.

We do not know who selected the theme of the “Angel of Bethesda” for the fountain figures, a biblical reference especially appropriate to symbolize the gift of fresh water the new Central Park reservoirs now made available to the citizens of New York.23 Vaux makes no mention of this theme in his 1863 report, and critic
James Jackson Jarves, writing before the fountain sculptures were completed, incorrectly identified the main figure as the Angel of "Siloam." As designer, Stebbins was the most likely author of the program, though the fountain apparently was not called the Bethesda Fountain until its unveiling in 1873.

Though Stebbins’s figures appear in the lithograph the 1863 report, at the time she had not yet been officially hired nor had she negotiated her fee with the Park commissioners. Late in 1861 Stebbins had received a letter from them requesting cost estimates for casting the fountain sculptures in bronze, but the commissioners did not pass a resolution approving the fountain project until October of 1863—almost two years later.

Several reasons can be put forth to explain this delay, not the least of which were the uncertainties of wartime. In addition, while Henry Stebbins doubtless had introduced his sister to the Park commissioners and to Olmsted and Vaux, in his capacity as chair of the Committee on Statuary, Fountains, and Architectural Structures her hiring for a Park project constituted a blatant conflict of interest. Once Henry Stebbins resigned from the board of commissioners after his election to Congress in 1862, his sister was free to accept the fountain commission.

In a significant departure from established policy, in their annual report for 1864 the Park commissioners announced that Stebbins had been hired and that she would be paid from Park funds for her work. "As the Fountain, in connection with the Terrace, forms a most important feature and as much time must necessarily elapse before it can be completed," the commissioners explained, "the Board has felt it proper in this instance to depart from its general determination not to make any considerable expenditure in the purchase or procurement of statuary or works of art." Perhaps not coincidentally, Henry Stebbins, who did not win re-election in 1864, rejoined the board soon after this decision and in 1865 served as its president, suggesting that though not a board member from 1862 to 1864, he did continue to wield some influence.

Negotiations with the commissioners were difficult and drawn out, in large part because of Charlotte Cushman’s involvement—or interference. In surviving letters, Cushman never mentions the Bethesda Fountain as a definite source of revenue, as she does many of Stebbins’s other sculptures, such as the Horace Mann. Several letters contain comments about or references to the prices Emma Stebbins should command for her sculptures, but the only time Cushman mentions actively campaigning for the Central Park commission is in a letter of May 31, 1862, when there was apparently some question of the project going through. In January of 1863 the commissioners requested estimates from Stebbins on "four pieces of work," perhaps the Seasons for the Terrace steps. Fearing that the Park commissioners were trying to squeeze Stebbins "down to the lowest price," Cushman, not Stebbins, replied to this communication, accusing the commissioners of grinding down artists’ fees so that they themselves could pocket surplus funds.

Cushman always worried about money, and her concerns about Emma Stebbins’s financial security grew as various family tensions began to worsen during 1864. Cushman supported her adopted son Edward Cushman and had encouraged his marriage to the daughter of powerful St. Louis businessman Wayman Crow; she also lobbied successfully for his appointment as American consul at Rome. But Edward and Emma Crow Cushman, who were long-time friends of Emma Stebbins’s professional rival Harriet Hosmer (by 1864 estranged from Cushman and Stebbins), disliked and envied Stebbins. In her letters, Cushman repeatedly tried to soothe their antagonism. "Is it true dear that you dislike Aunt Emma," Cushman had asked Emma Crow Cushman in the summer of 1861. "Surely she has never given you offense or been otherwise than kindly to you. . . . I love her very much—she is the finest nature I have ever been thrown in contact with—the very dearest, tenderest of human beings and I want you both to love her."31

We know from her letters that Cushman had placed at least a portion of her own finances in Henry Stebbins’s hands soon after meeting Emma Stebbins. But
what should have been a logical financial decision instead seems to have set up a destructive conflict. Cushman in effect made a sort of exchange with Henry Stebbins—control of her sizeable assets for his sister’s freedom. When Stebbins wrote to her brother late in 1864 to ask that he pay for her expenses, Henry replied with an angry letter in which he criticized Stebbins’s life style and pressured her to return to New York.32

At the same time word came from Boston that the Mann project was in jeopardy. The full-scale plaster model of the figure had been sent to the Müller foundry in Munich in the early summer of 1862, but delivery of the finished bronze version was delayed because Müller had not received payment, and it was still in Munich in January 1865. A number of Bostonians, impatient with the delays attending completion of the Mann memorial, began to lobby for a replacement monument to the recently deceased legislator and orator Edward Everett. In a letter of January 25 to the editor of the Boston Transcript, Samuel Howe, chairman of the Mann Committee, explained that the first two payments (of one thousand dollars each) had been sent to the sculptor and that the balance of one thousand dollars could not be paid until the statue arrived in Boston.33

Although Stebbins had received the two thousand dollars, she could not authorize the disbursement of these funds to the foundry without the approval of her brother, who evidently controlled her finances. Cushman feared that Henry Stebbins would not release funds for his sister “and that she will have to pay for it herself through the money which I intend to raise for it if I come to America this summer.”34 In February 1865 Cushman finally stepped in and removed her money from Henry Stebbins’s control, in effect forcing him to authorize his sister’s disbursement of the Mann payments to the foundry. After this was done in April and the bill for casting paid, the statue was delivered and finally unveiled on July 4, 1865. Stebbins was paid four thousand dollars for the Mann statue, as Cushman had originally hoped, although the final two thousand dollars were not forwarded to her until 1871.35

Payment for the Bethesda Fountain was not finally authorized by the Central Park commissioners until the spring of 1870. Stebbins was paid just over two thousand dollars for the work, and the founder, Müller, was paid just over six thousand dollars.36 Cushman had relieved Emma Stebbins of her obligation to her brother. “I wish she did not ask him for anything more in her life,” Cushman exclaimed to Emma Crow Cushman late in February 1865, “and if her fountain was once finished she should not!”37

At this same time, the Stebbins family openly questioned the propriety of Emma’s relationship with Cushman, a talented and internationally respected woman who had nonetheless made her career in the only marginally respectable acting profession. Cushman reported that Henry Stebbins had not hesitated to inform his sister of the family’s disapproving opinion that her life with Cushman had injured her “morally, socially, and physically.”38 The situation was not improved by similar comments made about Stebbins by members of Cushman’s family. Yet the women withstood these attacks, refusing to be separated. “My dear children . . . must try by their affection and consideration and thoughtfulness towards [Emma] to do away with these miserable impressions,” Cushman insisted to Emma Crow Cushman, “They will love dear Aunt Em for all her sweetness and goodness and love to me. They will be sorry for the hurts she has received through and by their aunts’ [sic] action in removing her securities from Col. Stebbins’ hands—they will be gentle with her failures and weaknesses. . . . Emma has fallen into very ill health, so poor that I do not know whether she can long remain in Rome—a worker.”39

By 1870 Cushman and Stebbins had indeed returned to the United States permanently, after Cushman was diagnosed with breast cancer. The decision to leave may have been quite sudden, for their apartments were not completely vacated until 1874. Stebbins left a number of unfinished works there, yet she expressed no objections about leaving them. Having sent the Bethesda Fountain plasters to Munich for casting, she was certainly more concerned for Cushman’s welfare. With no more outstanding commissions, she could abandon sculpture without going back on her word to any client.

Reasons for the sudden departure may also have been financial. Cushman, knowing she had only a few years to live, was determined to consolidate her fortune for the benefit of her heirs: her nephew and
adopted son, Edward Merriman Cushman, and his family, and Emma Stebbins. During 1871, Cushman re-established herself in Newport, Rhode Island (in a house designed for her by Richard Morris Hunt), where she was joined by her nephew and his family. Soon thereafter she began a series of farewell performance tours.

Stebbins attended Cushman on tour whenever possible, but her health also was deteriorating. In a letter of March 24, 1874, to fellow sculptor Anne Whitney, Stebbins expressed her frustration at not being able to go to Cushman, who had suffered a serious relapse while on tour. Stebbins finally was, “obliged to take my life in my hands and get on to Philadelphia where Miss C. was imploving me to come.” Stebbins’s time from then on was monopolized by Cushman, whose condition worsened during 1875.

In 1873 the bronze figures for the Bethesda Fountain were finally installed. Their delivery had first been delayed by the Franco-Prussian War, and then once in New York the installation had been slowed by bureaucratic difficulties among the Central Park builders. The fountain was unveiled in late May.

Critical reception of the Bethesda Fountain was mixed. The correspondent for the *New York World* declared that “no description and no cut can give an adequate representation of the grace, freedom and animation which are the distinguishing excellences of the work.” The *New York Evening Post* observed that “the more we look at [the Angel] the more we are impressed with the profound significance of the design (more truthful than any truth that science has yet attained) that what often appear the commonest benefactions of life, such as water, are among the most precious gifts of Heaven and worthy of the special and incessant ministries of the purest and noblest spirits.”

But a reviewer in *The Aldine* called it “the most pretentious and least successful work in bronze set up in Central Park.” and the critic for the *New York Times* wondered why the commission had been given to Stebbins. “a sculptor apparently of New York, though less known to New Yorkers than some others of whom we are with justice very proud,” and called the unveiling of the long-awaited monument anticlimactic: “All had expected something great, something of angelic power and beauty, and when a feebly-pretty idealess thing of bronze was revealed the revulsion of feeling was painful.”

Stebbins claimed to disregard these critical attacks. She wrote to Anne Whitney:

*I confess I dreaded the comments of the press which in this country respects nothing human or divine and is moved by any but celestial influences. I however sent you only the favorable notices—there have been others and notably one which I understood has been copied into a Boston paper. I am told it found its inspiration in the Bronze Casting interest here and was chiefly an ignorant attack upon that part of the work. I did not see it myself—not caring to have my mind disturbed by the mean undercurrents of what they are pleased to call criticism here.*

The influence of the American bronze casting industry in the criticism of Emma’s work is an interesting detail—the comments to which she referred were contained in the deprecatory *Times* review. That the quality of the fountain figures should have depended upon their being cast in Munich was not a valid criticism, since many important American bronze sculptural monuments produced during the 1850s and 1860s had been cast by Müller. By the 1870s American sculptors had begun to turn increasingly to French foundries, such as Barbedienne’s, as well as to native foundries, such as the Ames Manufacturing Company in Chicopee, Massachusetts, but many still continued to patronize the Bavarian foundry.

Stebbins’s works were widely praised in the New York press in 1860–1861, during the exhibition at Goupil’s, but by 1873 reviewers were unfamiliar with her name. For the thirteen years she had lived in Rome, Stebbins maintained no professional profile in the United States. Similarly, for all intents and purposes, in 1865 the Horace Mann had been delivered to the people of Boston from an unknown artist. Very little comment was made about that sculpture when it was unveiled. Moreover, by the 1870s the aesthetic and artistic aims of American artists in Rome—once so admired—now seemed retardataire. In 1868 Charles Akers, Paul’s brother, suggested in an article on “Sculpture in the United States” that American expatriates had become, as it were, denationalized:

*While in Rome they must do much as the Romans do and they cannot respond fully to our needs and sympathies at home . . . it seems evident that the study of classicism in Italy does not give the modern artist the power of the ancients, or else it does not make that power available for present needs. Instead of taking root in the new soil and growing healthily and vigorously from it, the artist who gives himself up to the classic influence flourishes bravely as a parasite on the firm old trunk, but yields us no fruit.*

If the number of public commissions awarded by her countrymen is any indication, Emma Stebbins was among the most successful of the American sculptors based in Rome after her receipt of the Mann and Bethesda Fountain commissions. But this was a qualified success, for she was paid less than her professional contemporaries. Moreover, there is no evidence that Stebbins promoted herself and initiated the lobbying for these commissions. Rather, there is more evidence that they were won through the efforts of her influential friends—Charlotte Cushman and her own brother Henry Stebbins.

Notwithstanding her professed indifference to criti-
and that she also had her brother Henry to thank for important commissions. Her place among the Americans in Rome had been created by the confident encouragements of these two mentors. But she feared continually that they overestimated her talent and that her sculptures were disappointing. She wrote to Whitney:

*My experience was a peculiar one, which if I could write it out exactly as I knew it and felt it, would teach many a lesson, but I could not do it, without reflecting upon influences which were honest though mistaken, and after all, what is one poor unit of life in the great sense of things? I did my little part as well as I could, and with some of the saving grace of truth and love to sanctify it—whatever its failures. As Lowell says: Good God not only reckons the moment when we tread his ways / But when the spirit beckons—and through all my life—the spirit has greatly led me, perhaps in some other sphere I shall be stronger to obey it.*

Stebbins was a modest woman, who judging from her few extant statements desired domestic contentment, spiritual happiness, and quiet self-expression. In 1857 she allied herself to the strong-willed and domineering Charlotte Cushman, who gave her the contentment and happiness. Stebbins did not particularly want fame, and she had no experience in dealing with publicity as did Cushman, an international celebrity and peerless self-promoter. Doubtless, Cushman could not conceive of a completely passive personality and thought she was helping Stebbins by encouraging her pursuit of a public career. Stebbins compensated as best she could, though she was always “conscious of so many faults!” She described herself as “a soft-shelled crab, before his new integument has hardened, very vulnerable, but I have been that all my life, forced by circumstances into hard-shelled positions. But I hope Charlotte will still hold her protecting shield over me—as she has always done—and I shall escape, under cover of the love and tender interest which is so universally felt for her.”

When she left Rome in 1870 Stebbins did not abandon sculpture or art completely, but simply retired from public activity. Once in America, her time was devoted to attendance on Cushman and, later, to the writing of a memorial biography of her friend. Negative criticism of it reinforced Stebbins’s lack of self-confidence. The state of her health also precluded any more large-scale sculptural projects, and she returned to doing pastel portraits and watercolors.

From 1878 to 1882 Emma Stebbins wandered between winter visits at her sisters’ houses in New York and summer stays in Lenox, Massachusetts, vainly seeking relief from the pulmonary condition which had weakened her. She apparently had little or no contact with her brother or his family. She died on October 25, 1882, and was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn.


cisms of the fountain. Stebbins revealed in other letters that she was indeed profoundly affected by the unsympathetic response to her public sculptures. She considered this a function of her own lack of talent and began to think that perhaps she had undertaken projects beyond her capabilities. In a letter to Anne Whitney of 1874, Stebbins pondered the situation of the artist. She described herself as always unable to justify or explain “the truth that was in me,” and this caused much mental and physical anguish. An artist, she wrote, “ought to take the easiest groove possible—otherwise the labor of mind and body could be too severe—if there is any divine gift—all the material things should be made as easy as possible.”

Stebbins was essentially an amateur pushed for a short time into more serious endeavors. She was aware that she owed her public career to Charlotte Cushman...
NOTES

My thanks to the many people who encouraged me to finish this long-overdue study and to those who assisted me in that task, especially Mrs. James Seeley, Sara Cedar-Miller, H. Nicholas B. Clark, William H. Gerds, Catherine Stover, and the staff of the New York City Municipal Archives.

1. Charlotte Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, July 26, 1861. Charlotte Saunders Cushman Papers, vol. 1:297. Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter referred to as Cushman Papers, with volume number and folio). In April 1861 Emma Crow married Edwin Cushman, the nephew whom Charlotte Cushman legally adopted after his mother's death. Emma Crow and her sisters Cornella and Mary were close friends of Harriet Hosmer's. Their father, the Saint Louis businessman Wayman Crow was also an important patron and mentor of Hosmer's (Dolly Sherwood, Harriet Hosmer, American Sculptor, 1830–1908 [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991], passim). The "politician" to whom Cushman refers was August Belmont, who sailed for Liverpool with Cushman and Stebbins aboard the Persia on July 17, 1861 (New York Times, July 18, 1861).

2. Stebbins was appointed to the board in 1859; he resigned in 1862 when he was elected to Congress, then rejoined the board in 1864. Stebbins is credited with having composed the nomenclature of the eighteen gates into the Park, and later in the decade he worked with Richard Morris Hunt on the designs for the sculptural elaboration of the southern entrances to the Park. In the "Report on the Nomenclature of the Gates of the Park," which Stebbins co-wrote with C.H. Russell and Andrew H. Green, the authors note, "The artistic adaptability of the general system of nomenclature above suggested has already been proved, and worthy types of the Miner, the Trapper and the Sailor, are now in existence, that have been conceived by American artists" (Fifth Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park [New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., 1862], pp. 125–136). Not insignificantly, Emma Stebbins already had treated two of these three themes. For Hunt’s involvement with the Park, see Charles E. Beveridge and David Schuyler, eds., Creating Central Park, 1857–1861, vol. 3 of The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 271–272, n. 13.

3. The manuscript was written in response to a query for biographical information that Frank Weitenkampf, curator in the Prints Division at the New York Public Library, had made in a letter sent to Emma Stebbins. Weitenkampf’s letter was apparently forwarded to Garland, who answered by sending him her manuscript and a note dated April 10, 1888.

4. Though Stebbins did not have his sister’s artistic talent, he did share her interest in the arts and he took a particular interest in the artistic embellishment of the Park. He was later a founder and director of the Academy of Music, president of the New York Philharmonic Society, a founding trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a member of the committee that contributed the Egyptian obelisk to Central Park (Ralph Stebbins Greenlee and R. L. Greenlee. The Stebbins Genealogy, 2 vols. [Chicago, Ill.: by the authors, 1904], 2: n.p.)


7. Ibid., pp. 11–12.

8. According to one obituary, Akers had received the Perry commission by the time of his death ("Benjamin Paul Akers," The Crayon 8 [1860]: 151).


10. Charlotte Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, undated, Cushman Papers, 1:303. This letter may have been written on or about July 15, 1861.

11. Joseph Leach, Bright Particular Star: The Life and Times of Charlotte Cushman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 305. Charlotte wrote to her friend James T. Fields, the Boston publisher, on June 26, 1861, to suggest that if he could find "somebody clever" to write a eulogy of Mann, she would deliver it at a benefit held to raise money for the monument. She noted that "in this way women will raise the statue" (James Fields Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California, quoted in Leach, Bright Particular Star, p. 310).


19. The Promenade, later renamed the Mall, was more fully described in the commissioners’ second report: “A rocky ridge bounds this green [the playing field] on the northeast, which has been reduced by blasting sixteen feet, throwing open from opposite points the two finest views on the park. The rock and earth removed from the ridge, together with that taken from a low hill, a quarter of a mile to the southward, have been used to fill a swamp lying east of the green. … This spot is to be planted with four rows of American elms forming a broad mall, with a fountain at either end, seats for visitors and accommodation for an orchestra” (Second Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park [New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., 1859], p. 64).

20. “Central Park Matters,” New York Times, May 1, 1860. Notwithstanding the expressed opinions of Olmsted and Vaux, the circular fountain was clearly marked on the Esplanade as early as the original Greensward Plan diagram.

21. “Description of the Terrace,” in Sixth Annual Report to the Board of Commissioners of the Central Park (New York: Wm. C. Bryant & Co., 1863), pp. 63–65. Only the carved vignettes of the Seasons and Seasonal Changes, designed by Mould to decorate the pillars of the stairways, were executed. See also Esther Lewittes, “The Terrace in New York’s Central Park,” Antiques 106 (October 1974): 649–663. Photographs of female figures with attendant putti, labeled “Receiving Gates” and “Dispensing Gates” in the scrapbook, also suggest that Stebbins developed designs for decorative sculptures to be placed around the Park reservoirs.

22. Ibid., p. 65.

23. The pool of Bethesda is described in John 5:2–4: “Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool,
and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of
the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had."

24. His review is quoted in “The Public Career of Emma Stebbins:
and n. 9.

25. The flyer, probably published at the time of the unveiling and
pasted into the Stebbins scrapbook, includes a citation of the relevant
verses from the gospel of Saint John and the vital measurements of
the structure and sculptures.

26. Charlotte Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, January 3, 1862,
Cushman Papers, 2:358.

27. Eighth Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Central
Park for the Year Ending with December 31, 1864 (New York: Wm. C.

28. Notably in a letter of November 23, 1861, to Emma Cushman, in
which she outlines a schedule of payment for the sculpture (Cush-
man Papers, 1:345).

29. Charlotte Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, January 10, 1863,
Cushman Papers, 2:517–518; Cushman Papers, 2:464.

30. Cushman’s relationship with the American consul at Rome,
William Stillman, was only cordial at best and it deteriorated into
blatant antagonism when in late 1864 Cushman used her influence
with Secretary of State William Seward to have Stillman replaced by
her nephew. In his autobiography, Stillman referred to the extraor-
dinary power which Cushman could wield over those whom she
came to fascinate. He noted that he knew of several young women
who were so completely dominated by her that they felt compelled
to flee “when they found out her real nature” (William J. Stillman,
1901], p. 361).

31. Charlotte Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, July 26, 1861,
Cushman Papers, 1:298.

32. Charlotte Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, February 27,

33. A letter to the editor of the Boston Transcript, signed “An Art
Patriot,” appeared in the January 24, 1865 issue, advocating the
Everett commission. Howe’s reply appeared on January 25.

34. Charlotte Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, February 10,
1865, Cushman Papers, 3:746. In the letters to Emma Crow Cushman
of February 10 and 18, 1865, Charlotte reported that she was
preparing to go to America to raise money for the Mann, because she
learned that Emma would have to pay for it herself (Cushman Papers,

35. The money was raised by public subscription (Bright Particular
Star, p. 353). Harriet Hosmer, although paid an amount for her statue
of Thomas Hart Benton comparable to the fee Stebbins received for the
Mann, commanded a thousand dollars each for her small marble
statues and during the early 1860s had an income of fifty thousand dol-
ars a year. Hiram Powers had received nineteen thousand dollars in
1850 for his statue Daniel Webster. John Quincy Adams Ward was
paid $17,000 for his statue of Perry (Sharp, John Quincy Adams Ward,
p. 171).

36. The financial accounting published in the annual report for 1870
records that Stebbins was paid $2,217.50; Müller was paid
$6,110.27. My thanks to Sara Cedar-Miller for directing me to these
entries in the Fourteenth Report of the Board of Commissioners of the Cen-
tral Park (New York: The New York Printing Co., 1871), pp. 94 and
105.

37. Charlotte Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, February 25,
1865, Cushman Papers, 3:757.

38. Charlotte Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, March 11, 1865,
Cushman Papers, 3:788.

39. Charlotte Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, March 11, 1865,
Cushman Papers, 3:790.

40. Emma Stebbins to Anne Whitney, March 24, 1874, Anne Whit-
ney Papers, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Mass. (hereafter referred to
as Whitney Papers). None of Emma Stebbins’s early correspondence
has yet been uncovered, so from 1857 until their return to America
in 1870 our main source of evidence is Cushman’s correspondence.
Stebbins’s voice finally emerges in the 1870s in a series of letters to
Anne Whitney and Sidney Lanier that have survived. Henry Stebb-
ins’s correspondence has yet to be uncovered, so we lack more
information about financial arrangements than Cushman’s letters
convey and know very little of Henry’s side of the story.

1873; “The Angel of the Waters,” New York Evening Post, May 19,
1873.

42. “Central Park Bronzes,” The Aldine 6 (October 1873): 207. This
reviewer goes on to state that the fountain cost about sixty thousand
dollars, but does not quote the source of this figure. If accurate,
Emma Stebbins certainly received a very small portion of this money.
See also “The Bethesda Fountain,” New York Times, June 1, 1873.

43. Emma Stebbins to Anne Whitney, July 10, 1873, Whitney
Papers.

44. Important American bronze sculpture monuments cast at the
Müller foundry included all of the figures by Thomas Crawford and
Randolph Rogers for the Richmond Monument (cast by 1868):
William W. Story’s statue of Edward Everett (1866, cast 1867); and
Thomas Ball’s Emancipation Group (cast 1875)—Shapiro, Bronze Cast-
ing and American Sculpture, pp. 24–29 and passim.

22 (November 1868): 559.

46. Emma Stebbins to Anne Whitney, March 24, 1874, Whitney
Papers.

47. Ibid.

48. Emma Stebbins to Sidney Lanier, April 10, 1878, Sidney Lanier
Papers, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.

49. When in New York, she stayed with either one of her two mar-
rried sisters, Mary Garland or Angela Fleming.
A CHECKLIST OF WORKS BY EMMA STEBBINS
Works illustrated by photographs in the Garland scrapbook are marked with an asterisk (*).

1. THE LOTUS EATER *
1857–1860. Marble. Charlotte Cushman described the figure as “small”—it was probably about thirty inches high. Unlocated.

1a. THE LOTUS EATER (Bust version) *
1857–1860. Marble. 16 1/2 in. The bust version of this figure may be the work referred to by Charlotte Cushman in letters as the Antinous. It was popular with tourist-patrons, and Cushman noted in a letter of April 1863 that Stebbins had sold four copies of the bust that winter. A fifth was purchased by the English textile magnate Samuel Courtauld. Unlocated.

2. INDUSTRY: THE MINER *

3. COMMERCE: THE SAILOR *

4. CHARLOTTE CUSHMAN *
1859. Marble. 30 in. One version of this bust is owned by the Charlotte Cushman Club, Philadelphia (signed and dated 1870).

5. NANNA RISI

6. HORACE MANN *

7. THE BETHESDA FOUNTAIN *
1861–1873. Bronze. The figure of the angel is eight feet high, the upper basin is ten feet in diameter, and the cherub figures supporting the upper basin are each four feet high. Central Park, New York, New York.

8. SANDALPHON *
1862. Marble. 31 in. Commissioned by Mr. Nathan of New York.

9. JOSEPH—THE DREAMER *
1862–1863. Marble. Ordered by the same Mr. Nathan of New York who requested the Sandalphon in early 1862. According to Mary Garland, one version of the Joseph (perhaps the original marble) was lost at sea, but several copies survived.

10. SATAN *

10a. SATAN (Bust version)

11. THE FOUR SEASONS *
No date. Designed as part of Calvert Vaux’s and Jacob Wrey Mould’s unrealized plan for decorative statues to be placed throughout the Terrace adjoining the piazza at the end of the Seventy-second Street Mall in Central Park. Stebbins’s figures would have been placed at the top of the first flight of paired stairways along the north face of the Terrace. The work did not progress beyond preliminary stages.

12. THE RECEIVING GATE OF THE RESERVOIR *
12a. THE DISPENSING GATE OF THE RESERVOIR *
1863? Possibly made for the Central Park Reservoir. Did not progress beyond preliminary stages.

13. HUDSON’S TREATY WITH THE INDIANS *

14. CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS *
1863–1865. Marble. 82 in. Commissioned by New York financier and collector Marshall O. Roberts, who presented the sculpture to the City of New York in 1869 in the hope that it would be erected in Central Park. Brooklyn Civic Center (Court and Montague Streets), Brooklyn, New York.

15. JOHN WILSON STEBBINS

16. SAMUEL *
1866–1868. Marble. The full length version is 38 inches high, the bust version is 24 inches high. Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Va; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

16a. SAMUEL (Bust version) *
1866–1868. Marble. 24 in. Private collection. The model for this figure was Stebbins’s nephew John Neal Tilton; he was also the model for the pedestal figures on the Bethesda Fountain.

17. GEORGE WASHINGTON

18. IL CACCIA TORE—THE HUNTER *
1863? This figure of a male dressed in rustic costume with a dog at his feet, illustrated in an unlabeled photograph in the Garland scrapbook, may be the Cacciatore referred to by Cushman in a letter. Unlocated.

19. KING’S CHAPEL MEMORIAL *
1865–1867. Illustrated in an unlabeled photograph in the scrapbook.

20. ANGEL OF THE RESURRECTION *
No date. Clay sketch, possibly unfinished.

21. FOUNTAIN *
No date. Clay sketch made for Mary Garland, possibly unfinished.

22. ROMA
Date unknown. Marble. Private collection.