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The Public Career of Emma Stebbins: Work in Marble

ELIZABETH MILROY

HER CONTEMPORARIES CONSIDERED

Emma Stebbins (1815–1882) an important member of the group of American women sculptors in Rome dubbed the “white marmorean flock” by Henry James. Stebbins’s name still figures in the historiography of American neoclassical sculpture, but despite recent attention prompted by the restoration of her best-known work, the Bethesda Fountain in New York’s Central Park, Stebbins remains a mysterious figure, overshadowed in modern scholarship by her rival Harriet Hosmer.

The lack of information about Stebbins’s career is due in large part to the actions of the artist herself. Until age forty Stebbins worked as an amateur painter and sculptor within the precincts of her upper-middle-class home in New York City. In 1857 she moved to Rome and there embarked upon a professional career. In the next decade Stebbins produced a dozen small-scale marble sculptures and two important public works in bronze, but in 1870 she left Rome, stopped making sculpture, and almost erased herself from the history of American art. In her final years Stebbins devoted herself to writing a memorial biography of her life companion, the actress Charlotte Cushman, the woman who had persuaded Stebbins to live and work in Rome as a professional artist and who acted as her chief promoter.

Fortunately, Stebbins’s self-effacement was countered by the efforts of her older sister Mary Stebbins Garland, who compiled two important records of her sister’s artistic activities. The first is an unpublished biography entitled “Notes on the Art Life of Emma Stebbins,” written by Garland in 1888, six years after her sister’s death. The second is a scrapbook assembled by Garland (probably at the same time she composed the biography), containing photographs of the models, in clay or plaster, or of the finished marble or bronze versions of most of the sculptures produced by Emma Stebbins between 1857 and 1870.

Garland arranged these photographs in chronological order, noting the titles and dates of execution of each work. She then added photographs of her sister and of people who had encouraged Emma Stebbins’s career—her teacher Paul Akers, her brother Henry Stebbins, and Charlotte Cushman—as well as newspaper clippings and handwritten biographical notes. The scrapbook functions as a sort of keepsake catalogue raisonnable and is an invaluable record of the artist’s life and work.

The Garland manuscript and scrapbook yield important and hitherto unknown or overlooked material on the life and work of Emma Stebbins. In the following essay, I shall reconstruct the productive, though short-lived, history of Emma Stebbins’s professional career, using the manuscript and scrapbook as my primary sources, supplemented and, where necessary, clarified by the testimony of Stebbins’s contemporaries, drawn from correspondence and published reviews. I have divided my study into two parts: in the first part I shall discuss Stebbins’s work in marble; in the second, to be published later, her public monuments, all of which were in bronze.

Emma Stebbins’s artistic career was both typical of her gender and generation, and unique. As a woman she had to struggle to obtain technical training and professional recognition, though her efforts were made easier by financial security and a supportive family. Like so many of her contemporaries, female and male alike, Stebbins found complete artistic fulfillment only as an expatriate, inspired by the Eternal City. Stebbins’s marble figures are among her most successful works and, from the start of her public career, they were admired by critics and sought after by influential collectors. During the early 1860s, she was awarded three major public commissions—more than any American woman had obtained to that date. Urged on by family members and a loving companion, Stebbins grew to fear and regret the hard politics and physical rigors of her public career. She was a perfectionist who refused to delegate the task of carving to hired stonemasons, as did so many of her peers, and the physical demands of making sculpture ruined her health. Significant works were lost; negotiations over payment with patrons and technical problems delayed her public projects. By the end of her active career as a sculptor, the expatriate Stebbins had become a stranger to her American audience. When the Bethesda Fountain was unveiled in 1873, fellow New Yorkers had forgotten who she was.

Emma Stebbins was born in 1815 in New York City, the daughter of a prosperous banker. In her popular 1859 compendium Women Artists of All Ages, Mrs. Elizabeth Ellet called Stebbins a perfect example of the well-bred woman who had taken proper advantage of the opportunities available to those of her class:

Few lady artists of this or any country have been surrounded with circumstances more favorable to the development of genius. Stebbins’s childhood was passed among those who possessed culture and refined taste, and she was familiar with the elegant adornments of life. She learned early to embody the delicate creations of her fancy in song or pictures, as well as to imitate what pleased her. Her family and nearest circle of friends were ready—as is not always the case—to appreciate and encourage her efforts.

By her twenties, Emma Stebbins was a diligent and dedicated worker whose skill and perseverance were remarked upon by contemporaries. “If years of study warrant the artistic career, Miss Emma Stebbins of New York is fully justified in adopting it,” wrote Henry Tuckerman in his Book of the Artists, “She long worked with crayon and palette as an amateur—making likenesses of her friends, copying fine pictures in oil, improving every opportunity to cultivate her taste and discipline her ability.” Stebbins sought out professional

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Harriet Cates Hardaway.
teachers, including the painter Henry Inman and the sculptor Edward Brackett. She made copies of paintings by European masters, became proficient at pastel drawing and clay modeling, joined the American Art-Union, and even submitted some works to public exhibitions, thus extending her activities as far beyond the domestic sphere as was acceptable for a well-born spinster of the time.

An undated portrait by Samuel Osgood, titled Miss Stebbins of New York, now in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, may document an important, if disappointing, episode in Stebbins’s early career. In 1842 Stebbins was elected an Associate Member of the National Academy of Design—the only category of membership open to amateurs. New Associates were required to submit their portrait within a year to confirm election, and Stebbins may have hired Osgood, who was one of the five other artists elected with her, for this purpose, since Academy rules did not stipulate by whom the portrait should be painted (though most candidates contributed self-portraits). Stebbins’s membership was cut short when her election and those of the five other candidates, including Osgood, were nullified because of an unspecified breach in procedure. Four of the five other candidates ultimately won election, but Stebbins’s name was never resubmitted.

Stebbins was undeterred by this setback and continued to paint, sculpt, and to send works to exhibitions. In 1843 and 1844 she exhibited portrait drawings at the NAD. The following year, she sent a Portrait of a Lady to the Artists’ Fund Society exhibition in Philadelphia; and in 1847 she submitted copies in oil after French painter Claude Marie Dubufe’s Saint John and French Sweep Boy to a special exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

According to Mary Garland the walls of their brother Henry Stebbins’s house were covered with Emma’s artwork. Henry had become the head of the family after the deaths of his father and two older brothers during the mid-1830s and it may have been he who encouraged his sister to visit Europe. In May 1856 Emma Stebbins sailed for Le Havre with her mother and a younger sister, Caroline. Their final destination was Rome where, as Mary Garland wrote, “everything tends toward artistic production, facilities and helps of all kinds are great. The very atmosphere is Creative.”

Within six months of their arrival, both Emma Stebbins and her sister Caroline had decided to settle in Rome. Caroline had met the American painter John Rollin Tilton, whom she married in 1858. Emma had been welcomed into the expatriate community by Harriet Hosmer, who introduced the newcomer to her teacher John Gibson, the dean of English sculptors in Rome, and to fellow American Paul Akers, who agreed to give Stebbins some instruction in anatomy and modeling.

It was Emma Stebbins’s friendship with the actress Charlotte Cushman, however, that developed quickly into a relationship of the greatest depth and intimacy. Since establishing her residence in Rome in 1852, Cushman had become a leading member of the American expatriate community and a powerful mentor to younger female artists and writers, most notably Hosmer. Stebbins supplanted Hosmer in Cushman’s affections, and she became not only Cushman’s favorite artistic protégée but her intimate companion. Just as she had furthered the careers of Hosmer and others, Cushman began to lobby for important sculpture commissions on Stebbins’s behalf. As a result, Stebbins’s friendship with Hosmer steadily faded, for the two women competed both as artists and as rivals for Cushman’s affection.

Within a year of their meeting, Cushman responded to queries about her domestic happiness with the question: “Do you not know that I am already married and wear the badge upon the finger of my left hand?” Thenceforth, Cushman always described Stebbins in terms of emotional and physical intimacy. It was “the greatest privilege in my life to have known and lived in the association which I have been allowed to do with [Emma],” Cushman declared, “She is high, true, noble and self-sacrificing . . . I love her dearly, so truly that anything which makes her unhappy makes me so—she is a part of me—as much as a life of eight years of the most intimate association can make her.”

Emma Stebbins later recalled her life with Cushman in similar terms. In a letter to fellow sculptor Ann Whitney, she wrote:
I lived with the embodied principle of love so many years that it became a part of being and has grown intensive more and more since it was taken away from me, so much so, that I have an ever-present consciousness that her spirit is still suggesting to me the beautiful principle by which she loved and wrought.16

According to Mary Garland, her sister's first sculpture in marble was a figure called The Lotus Eater, commissioned during the spring of 1857 by British sculptor John Gibson.17 The subject was based on a poem by Tennyson, in turn taken from an episode in the Odyssey of Homer that described travelers who exist on the Lotus islands, seduced by the fruit of the lotus tree into abandoning any desire to return to their homelands.18 Stebbins's Lotus Eater was a standing male nude, wearing lotus flowers in his hair and carrying a branch in his right hand as he idly leans against a tree stump. The pose of the youth echoes the Satyr of Praxiteles in the Capitoline Museum. In the title and attributes of her figure, Stebbins referred to feelings of self-exile and impotent homesickness, revived by the poem, that she herself no doubt experienced as an expatriate.19
SEBBINS'S WORK ON THE LOTUS EATER WAS INTERRUPTED IN SEPTEMBER 1857, WHEN SHE ACCOMPANIED CUSHMAN BACK TO THE UNITED STATES. CUSHMAN'S RETIREMENT FROM THE THEATER HAD LASTED ONLY A LITTLE OVER A YEAR, FOR SHE DISCOVERED THAT HER BUSINESS MANAGER HAD EMBEZZLED A SIZEABLE PORTION OF HER SAVINGS. IT WAS NECESSARY THEREFORE, THAT SHE RECOUP THESE LOSSES. ALMOST IMMEDIATELY UPON ARRIVING IN AMERICA, CUSHMAN BEGAN AN EXTENSIVE TOUR OF THE EAST AND MIDWEST. SEBBINS STAYED WITH HER FAMILY IN NEW YORK FOR THE WINTER AND SPRING OF 1858 AND JOINED CUSHMAN IN WASHINGTON IN MAY. ON JULY 6 CUSHMAN GAVE WHAT SHE INSISTED WAS HER TRUE "FAREWELL" PERFORMANCE AT NIBLO'S GARDEN IN NEW YORK. THE TWO WOMEN THEN SAILED TO ENGLAND, TOURED THE CONTINENT, AND IN EARLY NOVEMBER 1858 MOVED INTO APARTMENTS AT 38 VIA GREGORIANA IN ROME, WHERE THEY WERE JOINTLY BY HOSMER. SEBBINS THEN RESUMED WORK ON THE LOTUS EATER, A REPLICA OF WHICH HAD BEEN ORDERED BY LEONARD JEROME OF NEW YORK, AND BEGAN MODELING THREE MORE SCULPTURES: THE STATUES OF INDUSTRY AND COMMERCE AND A PORTRAIT BUST OF CUSHMAN.


THE COMMISSION FOR THE MARBLE BUST PORTRAIT OF CUSHMAN CAME FROM R.D. SHEPHERD OF SHEPHERDSTOWN, VIRGINIA (NOW WEST VIRGINIA), A FRIEND OF CUSHMAN'S FATHER WHO HAD FINANCED HER MUSICAL EDUCATION. HIS REQUEST FOR THE PORTRAIT CAME AFTER ENCOUNTERING HIS FORMER PROTÉGÉE IN NEW ORLEANS DURING HER 1858 TOUR. 23 CUSHMAN WAS NOT CONVENTIONALLY PRETTY, AND MALE ARTISTS HAD FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO PRODUCE A PORTRAIT THAT WAS BOTH HONEST AND FLATTERING. THOMAS SULLY PAINTED HER IN 1843 AS A WIDE-EYED INGENUE, AN IMAGE WHICH BORE NO RESEMBLANCE TO THE WOMAN. 24 WILLIAM PAGE'S EFFORT OF 1853, PAINTED DURING CUSHMAN'S FIRST SOJOURN IN ROME, WAS MORE ACCURATE, BUT LIFELESS. SEBBINS, BY COMPARISON, BROUGHT A UNIQUE INTIMACY AND SENSITIVITY TO HER RENDERING. SHE LATER DESCRIBED CUSHMAN'S "WINNING CHARM . . . FAR ABOVE MERE BEAUTY OF FEATURE, A WONDEROUS CHARM OF EXPRESSION AND SYMPATHY WHICH TOOK ALL HEARTS AND DISARMED CRITICISM." FOR SEBBINS, CUSHMAN HAD A DEEPER, TRuer BEAUTY, POSSESSING "FINE, STATED PRESENCE, A MOVEMENT ALWAYS GRACEFUL AND IMPRESSIVE, A WARM HEALTHY COMPLEXION, BEAUTIFUL, WAVY, CHESTNUT HAIR AND THE FINEST EYES IN THE WORLD." 25

URING THE WINTER OF 1860 SEBBINS WORKED DILIGENTLY TO READY WORK FOR AN EXHIBITION SHE HAD BEEN OFFERED BY THE FIRM OF GOUPIl IN NEW YORK—SO DILIGENTLY THAT CUSHMAN FEARED FOR HER HEALTH. IN A LETTER OF MARCH 26, CUSHMAN CONFIDED TO EMMA CROW THAT SEBBINS "IS IN SUCH A DESPERATE STATE ABOUT HER LOTUS EATER THAT IF I LET HER KEEP [AT] IT ANY LONGER ... IT WILL INDEED 'EAT HER.'" SEBBINS WAS A PERFECTIONIST. EXCITED, YET FRIGHTENED, BY THE PROSPECT OF HER PROFESSIONAL DEBUT IN NEW YORK, HER SEEMING LACK OF CONFIDENCE DROVE SEBBINS TO STRAIN HER PHYSICAL CAPABILITIES. "SHE IS NOT VERY WELL JUST NOW," CUSHMAN CONTINUED, "AND THE WORK SHE EVERY DAY FINDS TO DO ON THIS LITTLE FIGURE MAKES HER AS NERVOUS AS DEATH ... SHE CANNOT BE CONTENTED WITH ANYTHING SHE DOES AND EVER SIGHS FOR HER IDEAL." 26


Charlotte Cushman, 1859, marble (photograph, Emma Stebbins Scrapbook).
art itself revives in the typical beauty which breathes from them. For they have grown up, not out of a sentiment only, but out of a serious and sustained study of anatomy, which indicates itself in the masterly poise and harmonized vigor of the figures.27

Mrs. Ellet echoed these sentiments in her description of the figure of Industry, which reminded her “strikingly of one of those magnificent Gothic kings whose images stand in the vestibule of the Museo Borbonico at Naples, yet the spirit and air of it are purely modern and American.” The unique “American” quality of Stebbins’s figure was its greatest asset, according to Ellet, “one of the most felicitous combinations of everyday, national truth with the enduring and cosmopolite truth of art ever seen, and it is a work which does equal credit to the sex and the country of the artist.” 28

These were heady phrases, and Stebbins must have been equally pleased when she read the Times critic’s comments on her portrait of Cushman. He wrote that it captured that particular quality which the Germans “call ‘inwardness,’ full, not of the fame which flickers and burns into life on the stage, but of the enduring qualities which make fame worth having when it is won.” He attributed this quality in the portrait to “a peculiar intimacy between the artist and the sitter.” 29

Even The Lotus Eater, Stebbins’s first effort, surpassed a hitherto popular Goupil exhibit in the opinion of the critic for the New York Daily Tribune:

Dubufe’s Adam and Eve has been removed from Goupil’s gallery, and in its place may be seen an infinitely superior work, which displays a better knowledge of the human figure, and a much higher order of artistic talent—we mean that beautiful statuette by Miss Emma Stebbins, which she calls The Lotus Eater. The idea is taken from Tennyson’s poem, but the creation of the artist is not the “wild-eyed, melancholy lotus eater” of the poet. Miss Stebbins’ lotus-eating youth has too much energy in his shining limbs, and has taken too much pains with the wreath upon his head, to serve as an embodiment of the ideal youth, “With half-shut eyes ever to seem / Falling asleep in a half dream.” But as a realization of her own idea, it is a most lovely image, which needs no quoted verses to interpret the meaning.30

These four sculptures satisfied exactly the requirements of the American art lover. The figures of Industry and Commerce displayed classical associations, but at the same time were modern and relevant in subject and dress, combining the best qualities of antiquity with those of modern America. Antique statues provided Stebbins with a canon for the anatomy of the male figure, since it is unlikely that she ever studied from the live model. As quotations from classical masterpieces, her figures shared the authority of admired figure types and expressive poses. Almost all of the single-figure sculptures Stebbins produced during the next decade echoed Antique works. This synthesis is implied in the Tribune critic’s characterization of The Lotus Eater as too energized and athletic to embody the drugged stupor of Tennyson’s creations. According to these critics, Stebbins had progressed beyond the usual capabilities of the female artist and had attained a truly worthwhile “American” imagery.

Back in Rome by late 1861, Stebbins started work on a “child’s angel” or Sandalphon.31 The Sandalphon was based on a poem by Longfellow describing the Angel of Prayer who stands at the Gates of Heaven gathering the prayers of humanity as red and purple flowers. Cushman described Stebbins’s statuette as “sweet, pure, calm, innocent, patient, receptive . . . . The size is lovely for a drawing room.” 32

Stebbins finished the Sandalphon in May of 1861, and
then started what Cushman described to editor and publicist James Fields as "a colossal head of the original (secesher, I call it) Rebel, 'The Archangel Ruined' as she calls it, alias Lucifer, which is full of power, and ought to be ordered by somebody at home." 33 While no record of this bust survives, a photograph in the Garland scrapbook gives some idea of the appearance of the "colossal head" and documents that Stebbins worked up, probably at the same time, a full-length figure of Satan, striding forth from the fires of Hell armed with his shield and spear, his body sheathed in an unusual scale-like armor which Stebbins adapted from the "catafract" armor worn by the figures of Roman cavalrymen carved along the column of Trajan. 34 As in the earlier Lotus Eater, Stebbins conceived a topical allegory by combining literary imagery—in this case derived from Milton's Paradise Lost—with classical form. Her Satan is infused with an expressive energy and grace which must have made it one of Stebbins's most successful works. 35 The photograph shows a plas-
ter or clay model; it is not known whether Stebbins ever translated the figure into marble. The figure however did attract the attention of critic James Jackson Jarves who praised Stebbins for her invention, though he slighted her technique:

If women sculptors fail in portraiture in bronze and marble, as would appear by the few essays they have made in this direction, they are often felicitous in their choice of ideal motives, whatever may be the shortcomings of execution. Miss Stebbins’ Angel Stirring the Waters of Siloam [sic], and her Satan descending to tempt Mankind, are apt instances of her talent in this respect.36

By the middle 1860s Stebbins had received important orders for new figures in marble and for replicas of earlier pieces—bust versions of the Lotus Eater and the Cushman portrait were especially popular. Early in 1862 a New York collector commissioned a figure of the youthful Joseph, a replica of which Stebbins made for the British industrialist-collector Samuel Courtauld. In 1863 she designed a bas-relief of Hudson’s Treaty with the Indians for New York collector Marshall Roberts, and sketched out a statuette of Columbus for a friend of Charlotte Cushman’s. By the late 1860s she had produced a second biblical figure, The Infant Samuel, a version of which was purchased by New York financier LeGrand Lockwood, as well as a posthumous portrait bust of her older brother John Stebbins, commissioned by the Mercantile Library in New York.37

A figure of Columbus commissioned, probably in 1863, by Marshall Roberts was Stebbins’s only life-size work in marble. Her rendition of the explorer was among the first of what would become a common subject by the end of the century. She portrayed Columbus in a now-familiar pose, standing at the helm of his ship, striking the contrapposto of the Doryphorus, his left hand raised to his heart. Any signs of perturbation are limited to a slight furrowing of his brow. Roberts intended the statue to be placed in Central Park under a protective glass housing, and he presented the figure to the City of New York in 1869. In his letter of presentation of February 20, 1869, Roberts vividly described Stebbins’s figure:

Columbus is represented as standing upon the deck of a ship alone and at midnight, just before the land of the Western continent burst upon his view. His mutinous crew have all deserted him and are feasting below, while he—the intrepid discoverer with a firm grasp upon the rudder post, looks eagerly, anxiously forward, piercing the darkness with his eye of faith and with earnest prayers to heaven for success, waits for the dawning of the day which, coming at last, brings with it victory and repose.38

Though doubtless Roberts suggested the subject, Stebbins’s Columbus treats a theme that ran throughout her works in marble, a theme first essayed in the Lotus Eater: that of the expatriate, tormented by homesickness yet committed to or condemned to exile. Joseph,
Samuel, even Satan, the explorers Columbus and Hudson—all were biblical or historical figures separated, for good or evil, from family and homeland.

At a time when other American neoclassical sculptors were making monumental life-size figures—Hosmer, for example, had treated the theme of exile in her monumental figure of Zenobia, a captive but defiant queen—Stebbins’s figures were small in scale. With the exception of Columbus, Stebbins’s works in marble are tabletop pieces measuring only thirty inches high.

Unlike her peers, as I have noted, Stebbins insisted on doing as much carving with her own hands as possible, and she was determined to avoid the kind of criticism launched against Hosmer, who in 1863 was accused by a British critic of taking credit for work done by an Italian in her employ. Hosmer sued, and in a published rebuttal described her work on the piece in question, her Zenobia:

The charge now brought against me is that this professional modeller does all my work, and to refute that charge, I here state, that after the statue of Zenobia was set up for me, from a small model, four feet high, which I had previously carefully studied, I worked with my own hands upon the full-sized clay model during a period of eight months, and therefore feel that if there is any merit in the figure, I may be entitled to at least a portion of it. Nor is this all: the man who undertook to prepare the work for me was not a professional modeller in clay but one of the marble workmen in Mr. Gibson’s studio.

Hosmer expanded upon this account for the Atlantic Monthly in an article called “The Process of Sculpture,” published in 1864. In this she likened the relationship of assistant and sculptor to that of “the mere linguist to the author who, in another tongue, has given the world some striking fancy or original thought.” Like most of her male counterparts working in Rome, all of whom relied to some extent on the assistance of Italian stonemasons, Hosmer believed that the artist’s genius was revealed in the initial clay sketch. “It is true, that, in some cases, the finishing touches are introduced by the artist himself,” she wrote, “but I suspect that few who have accomplished and competent workmen give much of their time to the mallet or the chisel, preferring to occupy themselves with some new creation, or considering that these implements may be more advantageously wielded by those who devote themselves exclusively to their use.”

The accusations against Hosmer, whether true or not, indicted all women sculptors and the controversy “has almost driven Emma Stebbins wild,” Cushman confided to Emma Crow. “That she should be classed among those who would be believed to have their work done for them makes her too miserable,” Cushman wrote, “and to struggle along without the material help which all sculptors must have has become so entirely a necessity to her that she is assuming labor for which she has neither physical nor mental strength.”

Cushman considered Stebbins a more original talent than Hosmer. She attributed Hosmer’s success to the woman’s education, “which was that of a boy—left to run about ... to grow a strong animal with keen perceptions ... These elements which are so strong in Hattie and which go to make her success much more than her individual talent for sculpture were early daguerreotyped upon her mind.” But Cushman was also sympathetic to Hosmer’s approach to work, for she feared that Stebbins’s honest independence would destroy her health:

Hattie has more done for her than any one else—that is she lets the workmen advance her figure farther than any of the others—but she is right! I never saw such crucifixion as Emma Stebbins, ... because she cannot accept these helps and tries to shuffle on to do all of her own work. I sometimes think she ought not to do it and I should be doing right to take her away and not let her come back to it.

Throughout the 1860s it had been Cushman who worried about Stebbins’s health. The actress maintained a busy touring schedule during her residence in Rome; she made frequent trips to England and other countries on the continent and regularly returned to the United States, most notably in 1863, when she
went on tour to raise funds for the United States Sanitary Commission. Stebbins accompanied Cushman on many of these trips, though she typically remained with her family in New York while Cushman was on tour, for Stebbins did not have a strong constitution and the long years of working in a studio filled with marble dust had aggravated a lung condition.

It was ironic, then, that it was Cushman's health that finally prompted Stebbins's departure from Rome and the end of her career as a sculptor. Cushman was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1869. Though she underwent surgery later that year in Edinburgh, it was not a success, and Cushman began to long for a return to America. Cushman, Stebbins, and Cushman's maid Sallie Mercer stayed in Rome only from November 1869 until the following May, when they once more set out for England. After brief stops in Italy, Munich, and Paris, the women arrived in London in July.46 There Cushman underwent further treatment for the cancer, but this too was unsuccessful. The women sailed for America in October of 1870. So quickly did they abandon Rome that several of Stebbins's pieces were left there, unfinished.

Though never satisfied in her drive for perfection, Stebbins was still happiest when modeling clay and carving marble. Alone in her studio, undistracted by hired assistants, she maintained control of the exhausting yet rewarding act of creation. To produce works in bronze, however, she had to relinquish that control. As I shall discuss in the second part of this study, when forced to interact with demanding patrons, negotiate payments, and haggle with bronze foundries to push her public monuments to fruition, Stebbins attained little of the satisfaction—or success—that attended her works in marble.

N O T E S


3. It is now in the Manuscripts Division of the New York Public Library (hereafter cited as the Garland Ms.).

4. The exact source of the scrapbook photographs is not known; they may have been the artist's own, or copies given to her sister. At some point ownership of the scrapbook passed to Emma Stebbins's youngest sister, Caroline Stebbins Tilton, and her descendants. It was donated to the Archives of American Art in 1980 (Emma Stebbins Scrapbook, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, hereafter Stebbins scrapbook).


6. Henry Tuckerman, The Book of the Artists: American Artists Life (New York: G.P. Putnam and Son, 1867), p. 602. Stebbins worked primarily as a painter during these years and many of her early works were copies of paintings by the Old Masters and European contemporaries. Mrs. Ellet lists such works as a Saint John "after Dubouef" (probably Claude Marie Dubufe), a Girl Dictating a Love Letter after "a painting in the gallery of the Louvre," and a Boy and Bird's Nest in the style of Murillo (see Ellet, Women Artists, p. 348).

7. Ellet, Women Artists, p. 347. Inman painted pendant portraits of Emma's parents in 1839, and it was probably at this time that he was introduced to the twenty-four-year-old amateur (also see the Garland Ms., n.p.): Brackett arrived in New York from Cincinnati in 1839 and exhibited portrait busts in 1840 and 1841 at both the Apollo Association and the National Academy, but left New York later in 1841 to settle permanently in Boston. Emma's first experiments in clay must therefore have been undertaken at some point between 1839 and 1841.

8. The painting has been tentatively identified as one of Stebbins's sisters but it is more likely an image of the artist, given her acquaintance with Osgood. Unfortunately, Osgood's rendering is so stylized that it is impossible to make any identification on the basis of surviving photographs of Stebbins.

9. Minute Book, number 2 (1842), p. 78. National Academy of Design, New York. Stebbins was elected an associate with S.S. Osgood. Jesse Talbot, Montgomery Livingstone, Mrs. Cornelius Dubois and Mrs. Bogardus, but there was then a motion "to reconsider all the candidates . . . [after which] Charles Lanman and S. Hanson Fisher were elected Associates." Osgood, Talbot, and Mrs. Bogardus were reinstated in 1845; Livingstone became an honorary member in 1847. The reasons for this short-lived affiliation are unknown. One theory is that Stebbins neglected to provide a diploma portrait, but the rejection of all six candidates, and the existence of the Osgood portrait would seem to contradict this.


12. For the first meeting of Stebbins and Cushman, in 1857, see Emma Stebbins, Charlotte Cushman: Her Letters and Memories of her Life (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Co., 1878), pp. 100–1. The only modern biographies of Charlotte Cushman are Joseph Leach, Bright Particular Star: the Life and Times of Charlotte Cushman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), and James Willis Yeater, "Charlotte Cushman, American Actress" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1959). See also Parrott, "Networking in Italy;""

13. Though Hosmer was still a member of Cushman's household when the actress acquired apartments at 38 Via Gregoriana in 1858, she had moved out by 1862 and was thereafter estranged from Cushman. See Sherwood, Harriet Hosmer, pp. 166–170, and pp. 301–3. The initial reactions of the Stebbins family to Emma's decision to remain in Rome and her relationship with Cushman are not known. Henry and their mother, Mary Largin Stebbins, apparently gave their approval to the friendship when Stebbins first moved into the Via Gregoriana apartments. As Cushman's influence with Emma Stebbins grew, however, relations with the Stebbins family became strained. Similarly, members of Cushman's family were jealous and expressed some concern that Stebbins would be a financial burden.

Papers, with volume number and folio). Emma Crow was the daughter of Saint Louis businessman Wayman Crow, an important patron of Harriet Hosmer. It was through Hosmer that Cushman befriended the Crow family and developed a passionate attachment to Emma Crow, with whom she maintained an extensive correspondence. In 1861 Emma Crow married Cushman’s nephew Edward Merriman, who had taken the surname Cushman when his aunt adopted him. See Sherwood, Harriet Hosmer, chapters 14, 15, and 16 passim.

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


17. Stebbins scrapbook, n.p. The statue is now unlocated.

18. They sat them down upon the yellow sand. / Between the sun and moon upon the shore / And sweet it was to dream of Fatherland. / Of child, and wife, and slave: but evermore / Most weary seem’d the sea, weary the oar / Weary the wandering fields of barren foam. / Then some one said, “We will return no more.” / And all at once they sang, “Our island home! Is far beyond the wave: we will no longer roam” (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “The Lotus-Eaters,” in Representative Poems of Tennyson, edited by Samuel Chew [New York: The Odyssey Press, 1941], stanzas 4 and 5).

19. Stebbins worked on the Lotus Eater from 1857 until 1860. During the same years another American, whom Stebbins knew in Rome and who knew her work, was inspired by the Satyr. Nathaniel Hawthorne first mentions viewing the Praxitelean statue in his travel diary entry of April 22, 1858, although he had visited the Capitoline before this (Hawthorne, Passages from the French and Italian Notebooks, pp. 180–81). In Hawthorne’s eponymous Italian romance The Marble Faun (1860), he revivified the Praxitelean figure in the character of Donatello, who embodies the honest sensuality of “unsophisticated man,” still attuned to his origins in nature. Back in the United States in 1861, Hawthorne sent greetings to Stebbins, “trusting that your native land will receive many memorials from your hand as beautiful (if possible) as the Lotus Eater” (Hawthorne to Stebbins, June 24, 1861. Norman Holmes Pearson Collection. Yale University Library, New Haven. quoted in Leach, Bright Particular Star, p. 312).

20. For Cushman’s tour see Leach, Bright Particular Star, p. 272.

21. Garland also reports that Stebbins executed a portrait of the famous Roman model Nanna Risi, probably at this time.

22. Emma had visited Naples during Easter of 1857 and could have seen the Roman copy of the Doryphorus at the Museo Nazionale there. Wayne Craven has suggested that the Commerce (derived, like The Lotus Eater, from Praxiteles’ Satyr) may have influenced Hawthorne, but she did not begin this sculpture until after Hawthorne left Italy. It is more likely that artist and writer arrived at their ideas for the Praxitelean model independently. Craven quotes → John S. Crawford, “The Classical Tradition in American Sculpture: Structure and Surface,” American Art Journal 11 (July 1979): 45 n. 21.

23. Stebbins, Charlotte Cushman, p. 19. In her teens Cushman possessed a fine contralto voice and began her theatrical career in opera, but was forced to abandon a singing career when she over-exerted and irreparably damaged her voice.

24. The portrait is now at The Library Company of Philadelphia. Sully also painted at least four replicas of his portrait of Charlotte for other patrons, including two miniatures of the actress in dramatic roles. These are listed in Edward Biddle and Mantle Fielding, The Life and Works of Thomas Sully (1921: reprint, Charleston, S.C.: Garnier and Co., 1969), catalogue numbers 404–6, 2029 and 2030.


26. Cushman to Emma Crow, March 26, 1860, Cushman Papers, 1:140.


32. Ibid., May 7, 1862, 2:446.


34. The “alae catafactarii” were auxiliary cavalry cohorts organized by Hadrian or Trajan during the second century.

35. This subject had been treated by Horatio Greenough, who carved pendant busts of Christ and Satan in 1843, and Thomas Ridgeway Gould, whose bust of Satan of 1864 may have been influenced by Stebbins’s version.


39. For a history and assessment of Hosmer’s controversial figure, see Kasson Marble Queens & Captives, chapter 6 and passim. See also Sherwood, Harriet Hosmer, chapters 13, 14 and 15 passim.

40. “Correspondence: Miss Hosmer’s Zenobia,” The Art-Journal, January 3, 1864, p. 27.


42. Ibid., p. 735. Hosmer’s remarks reveal that artists drew a fine line between “inspiration” and “execution.” Indeed, William Wetmore Story declared that Michelangelo might have saved valuable time had he not bothered to carve his own marble! The assistance of stonemasons in the intial roughing out of the marble block was an old tradition; the reliance of both American and some European nineteenth-century sculptors on their mason-assistants seems to have stemmed from a misunderstanding of Antonio Canova’s studio practice. Differing concepts of the “artist-genius” and craftsman-mechanic may also have contributed to the situation, not to mention the economic advantages of multiple replicas. For a discussion of Canova’s actual working practice, → Hugh Honour, “Canova’s Studio Practice, I: The Early Years,” and “II: 1792–1822,” Burlington Magazine 114 (March and April 1972): 146–59 and 214–229. For Story’s comment, see his Excursions in Art and Letters (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1891) pp. 37–38.

43. Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, February 4, 1864, Cushman Papers, 2:627.

44. Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, January 30, 1862, 2:380.

45. Cushman to Emma Crow Cushman, February 4, 1864, 2:627.