

US-American New Women in Italy 1853-1870

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Abstract: In her article "US-American New Women in Italy 1853-1870" Sirpa A. Salenius discusses the Italian experience of sculptors such as Harriet Hosmer and Edmonia Lewis, who were independent, career-oriented women studying and working in Rome in the mid-nineteenth century. They were among the most representative New Woman figures who started to challenge US-American society's male-dominant norm and gender-imposed limitations, while reinventing an identity for themselves. Other progressive women, who observed them in Italy, were impressed and influenced by the example of their lives and work. For instance, the influence of Frances Willard's visit to Italy became visible after her return to the U.S. where she became a distinguished lecturer, writer, and social reformer who dedicated her life to furthering women's rights within the temperance movement. The Italian experience changed the lives of many women who, in turn, influenced other women in the United States of the period.

Sirpa A. SALENIUS

US-American New Women in Italy 1853-1870

Many scholars have examined the influence of Italy on the lives and careers of US-American writers and artists of the nineteenth century, when the peninsula was one of the main destinations of the American Grand Tour of Europe. Mary Suzanne Schriber suggests that in the nineteenth century US-Americans were pushed to search for European culture while they strengthened their own national identity through travel (20). For women in particular, travel was a liberating activity, a freedom of movement, and in direct contrast to the immobility of female domestic space. Many women artists and writers traveled abroad not only to leave their domestic confinements but to explore and develop their potential outside the narrow-mindedness of their patriarchal society. These women travelers of the mid-nineteenth century — many of them independent career-oriented women who were among the first representatives of the New Woman figure — started to challenge society's male-dominant norm and gender-imposed limitations while reinventing an identity for themselves. This process was made easier overseas, especially in such countries as Italy, where the atmosphere tended to be more liberal than in the U.S. Yet, in such cities as Rome and Firenze, the social life of most US-American visitors revolved around the Anglo-American expatriate circles. As Margaret Fuller — who kept US-Americans informed about the Italian unification movement through her political dispatches — confirmed in 1849, she had in Firenze "no other acquaintance except in the American Circle" (280). In a similar way, Edith Wharton explained that it was common for US-Americans in Italy to gravitate towards the English-speaking colonies (62). In these Anglo-American communities such transatlantic women as Margaret Fuller, Kate Field, and Constance Fenimore Woolson, to name just a few, were creating successful careers for themselves as novelists and journalists. However, among the first and most representative of the New Woman figure were female sculptors, in particular Harriet Hosmer and Edmonia Lewis. They both lived and worked in Rome starting from the 1850s. They became examples of New Woman not only to other US-Americans but also for many Europeans who had an opportunity to witness their metamorphosis from free-spirited youths into more mature modern women. To those who met them, they seemed confident in their new roles and they seemed to radiate happiness and self-satisfaction as they were realizing their artistic ambitions.

Indeed, other women who visited Rome in the nineteenth century were quite fascinated about the example these women artists set with their unconventional way of life and thriving careers. Such women as the English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), the Swedish novelist and women's rights advocate Fredrika Bremer (1801-1865), and the future leader of women's temperance movement Frances Willard (1839-1898) admired the determination and successful self-realization of the US-American female sculptors studying and working in Italy. It can be argued that these women observed rather than participated in the progressive life of the transatlantic artists in Italy. With great curiosity they approached the sculptresses as if they were among local attractions. While in Rome, they commented on the appearance, lifestyles, and works of Harriet "Hattie" Hosmer (1830-1908) and Edmonia Lewis (ca. 1845-1909?) in their letters, diaries, and travel books. Moreover, the figure of the modern US-American woman gained force when Willard, for one, compared it to the figure of the oppressed Italian woman. The transformative influence of Willard's own visit abroad became visible after her return to the U.S.: she became a distinguished lecturer, writer, and social reformer who dedicated her life to furthering women's rights within the temperance movement. Indeed, the Italian experience changed the lives of many women who, in turn, influenced other women of the time period, both in the United States and Europe.

As early as in the 1840s, as Elizabeth Langland states, "Victorians were engaged in a significant debate over the roles, rights, and responsibilities of women" (381). This woman question became one of the important topics of the late nineteenth century not only in England but also in the United States and throughout continental Europe. From lectures, speeches, and heated debates to written publications, the figure of the New Woman appeared on the central stage in discussions challenging the period's patriarchal norms. The New Woman questioned her role and limitations, eventually challenging them by entering the public domain. Especially in the last two decades of the nineteenth

century, many progressive women were involved in organizing conferences and establishing national and international associations that were dedicated to improving the situation of women. These organizations gained importance as women formed networks for collaborating and pursuing the same interests and goals internationally. The organized gatherings of like-minded women provided forums for discussing various topics concerning women, from their social position to their rights, from their professional opportunities to their role and influence in society and politics. These events also provided an opportunity for women to share their knowledge, set examples, and exchange ideas (about the emerging figure of the New Woman and more about the national and international women's organizations and networks, see, e.g., Campbell and Kean; McFadden; Offen; Pykett; Rupp). These educated women, who were not content to remain immobile in the domestic sphere, campaigned to obtain better educational, social, and political opportunities. In general terms, they became a threat to the entire patriarchal social order.

Since the early decades of the 1800s US-American male artists had been going to Italy to study art, find inspiration, and start their careers as painters and sculptors. Thomas Cole, who arrived in Italy in the 1830s, was one of the first to create original paintings rather than copying Italian masterpieces. Hosmer and Lewis were among the first generation of transatlantic female artists who started their careers and found success in Italy. They moved to Italy in the 1850s and 1860s, respectively. During the years from 1853 to 1860, Hosmer was studying in Rome under the English sculptor John Gibson. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who was her close friend, offered a vivid image of Hosmer's independent life in Rome. In a letter written to Miss Mitford in May 1854, Barrett Browning presented Hosmer as a woman ahead of her time and a woman who was unconcerned about the opinions of others regarding her daily life (see Lubbock). As Barrett Browning's letter testified, her appearance and behavior was perceived as 'eccentric' when measured against the standards and norms of the time. To quote Barrett Browning: "I should mention, too, Miss Hosmer (but she is better than a talker), the young American sculptress, who is a great pet of mine and of Robert's, and who emancipates the eccentric life of a perfectly 'emancipated female' from all shadow of blame by the purity of hers. She lives here [Rome] all alone (at twenty-two); dines and breakfasts at the cafés precisely as a young man would; works from six o'clock in the morning till night, as a great artist must, and this with an absence of pretension and simplicity of manners which accord rather with the childish dimples in her rosy cheeks than with her broad forehead and high aims" (Barrett Browning qtd. in Lubbock 321).

In addition to working and living independently — financially, emotionally, and physically — Hosmer also followed the political events of her time. Indeed, Hosmer, who dressed like a man, had her hair cut short and went horseback riding alone, was an unconventional woman whose life differed little from the life of the period's male artists living and working in Italy. While a contemporary critic confirmed that Hosmer was, indeed, "a fact of the new womanhood of our time" (Osgood 422), her friends tended to be concerned about her eccentric manners. For instance, Fanny Kemble, whose daughter Sarah was a friend of Hosmer's, admired the artist for her energy and perseverance, but was concerned about her "peculiarities." As Kemble wrote, she was convinced that Hosmer's disregard of conventionalities would "stand in the way of her success with people of society and the world, and I wish for her own sake," she continued, "that some of them were less decided and singular" (Hosmer, *Letters* 28). This indicates how modern and original Hosmer's way of life seemed even to those who knew her intimately. Yet, according to the testimony of her friends, Hosmer was respected despite her short hair, frankness of character, and "boisterous" spirits. As Miss Hayes put it in one of her letters, "she [Hosmer] has surmounted all the difficulties of her position as woman and artist" (Hosmer, *Letters* 69-70). Hosmer herself wrote repeatedly to her friends telling them how happy she was living and working in Rome. As is evident from her letters, her happiness derived from the opportunity she had for self-fulfillment both in her personal and professional life (see, e.g., Hosmer, *Letters* 27, 31, 42).

Another visitor in Rome, who was fascinated with Hosmer and provided testimony of her life in Rome during her visit there in the spring of 1858 was the Swedish novelist Fredrika Bremer. At the time of her Italian tour, Bremer was already famous in Europe and the United States for her controversial novels in which she promoted women's emancipation. In her travel book, *Two Years in Switzerland and Italy* (1861), she described her visit to the studio of Gibson, where she met Hosmer.

In Bremer's eyes, the young sculptress was Gibson's most interesting work. As Bremer reported, Hosmer was fully engaged in working on her statues *Hecuba*, *Daphne*, *Sleeping Girl*, and *Puck*. She had already executed seven copies of the "impish" boy and intended to make a female counterpart to him. This female figure was to be Topsy, who would be modeled after the girl in Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Bremer described the artist as having a small but well-formed figure, which seemed an expression of energy and health. According to Bremer, her pretty, round, animated countenance and her glance and smile had something of little Puck in them. Bremer concluded her description of the artist with the following observation: "She seems happy and full of the freshness of life, and will dedicate her whole life to Art" (248). According to the Swedish women's rights advocate, the sculptress could not have advanced to where she was without a great amount of energy and her Puck-like character (Bremer 249). In other words, the characteristics of the New Woman who was to succeed in her career were dedication, energy, and good humor. As Bremer was able to witness, Hosmer had found her happiness in being able to use her talent to create art. Her joy was visible in her countenance as she was energetically working on the first examples of truly original US-American art. Hence, she was a pioneer in several ways — as a woman and a US-American artist who was contributing her share to conceiving American national culture.

For many women, the dislocation from the U.S. to Italy was perceived as somehow a transition into a neutral ground where social constraints no longer were applicable. The more liberal environment nourished the women culturally and enflamed their genius and made it blossom. The social freedom associated with Italy was attractive not only to sculptors and writers but also to actors. For instance, Charlotte Cushman (1816-1876) also lived in Rome. Cushman, herself an example of the New Woman, was instrumental in developing US-American female artists. She had provided the opportunity for Hosmer — who was one of her many female protégées — to work and study in Rome. In addition to Hosmer, she also mentored Edmonia Lewis. Indeed, many US-American women in Rome, who succeeded in attaining a high reputation as sculptors, were gathered around Cushman (Markus 3-4, 170-71). Other artists in her entourage included Emma Stebbins (1815-82) and Vinnie Ream (Hoxie) (1847-1914) who, according to Georg Brandes, represented "the embodiment of the new American woman and the mythic American West" (Brandes qtd. in Rubinstein 66). Thus, both men and women internationally recognized the significance of US-American female artists as representatives of the New Woman in Italy.

Male artists, who felt threatened by the female talent and competition for commissions, attacked the women artists with harsh criticism on their personality, appearance, behavior, and lastly, on the quality of their works. For instance, Thomas Crawford accused Hosmer for lack of modesty, as well as for modeling male bodies in their entirety. Since it was considered inappropriate that women sculptors would be familiar with men's bodies, most of their subjects were either busts of both men and women, or full-body female statues (Nelson 23). Crawford blamed Hosmer by claiming that her "want of modesty is enough to disgust a dog. She has had casts for the entire model made and exhibited them in a shocking indecent manner to all the young artists who called upon her" (Crawford qtd. in Nelson 23). Crawford's disapproval was aimed at Hosmer's "improper" behavior. First of all, as a woman, she was expected to be humble about her work. In the same way as women authors often were labeled "female scribblers," women sculptors were deemed to have inferior skills when compared to their male counterparts. In addition, Crawford seemed to maintain that Hosmer should have kept the casts hidden from general view. While it would have been acceptable for a man to exhibit the casts, when the artist was a woman, showing the casts of body parts was deemed "shocking" and "indecent." In addition to criticizing their improper manners and customs, men like Crawford found other motives to attack their female rivals. For instance, despite the success of Hosmer and other women sculptors, their male colleagues often accused them for not doing their own work and for leaving the physical labor to their assistants and marble cutters. Hosmer, for one, was not intimidated by the attacks of her male colleagues. She rejected the obedient, subservient female role model of the time by refusing to accept the allegations without reacting. Instead, she knew how to defend herself: she wrote an article in response to the accusations. In "The Process of Sculpture," published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1864, she explained in great detail the procedure of making sculptures and the role assistants and marble cutters had in the process. In defense of her artist friends, she pointed out how male artists also relied on the help of their students and workmen. Hosmer argued that differing from men, women

artists were deprived of the merit of their work, which was attributed to the skill of their workmen. Instead, she demanded that women artists should be entitled to the credit of their talent and conscientious labor in the same way as men ("Process" 734-37).

As Charmaine Nelson confirms, "these female sculptors, who were themselves resisting cultural and social marginalization" were "often regarded as threatening and transgressive by their male contemporaries" (38). (Maria) Louisa Lander (1826-1923) is an example of how women artists were marginalized when they were deemed to have crossed the line of proper behavior. Initially, Lander's clients included prominent US-American literary figures such as Hawthorne, who sat for Lander before she was expelled from the Roman US-American colony as a direct result of her rumored sexual indiscretion (Nelson 34). During her stay in Rome, Bremer met Lander, who was Crawford's student but at the time was working independently. In Bremer's opinion she had less talent and originality than Hosmer, but her subjects were noble. Among her works Bremer saw "the bust of the American novelist, Hawthorne, with the striking head. Such an expression as is there given proceeds from the soul" (249). Thus, Bremer recognized Lander's talent and skill in executing her work. Yet, despite her admired work, the rumors caused US-Americans in Italy to turn their backs on Lander. The gossip that went around the colony sustained that she had become intimate with a man. A testimony of what exactly was being said about her at the time, comes from Lander's cousin, sculptor John Rogers, who wrote that: "She [Louisa Lander] has the reputation of having lived on uncommonly good terms with some man here. She is very vain of her figure and a number of respectable people affirm that she has exposed herself as a model before them in a way that would astonish all modest Yankees" (Rogers qtd. in Rubinstein 59). In the accusation the man remained nameless which suggests the unreliability of the rumor. On the other hand, it indicates how society protected the nameless man by accusing Lander alone by name of her "unacceptable" behavior. Even more objectionable was her possible nudity, as insinuated, when she was claimed to have posed as a model. According to the rumor, undoubtedly exaggerated, she had exposed her body in front of "a number" of people, all of them respectable. It is highly unlikely that she would have shown her nude body to a large group of people. Although she may have been leading a life that could have been deemed unconventional in the time period, Lander hardly would have purposefully shocked the members of the proper Anglo-American social circles. Instead, the disapproval of her posing as a model was linked to the commonly held idea about the sexual availability of models. As a consequence of her disreputable behavior, she lost commissions and barely survived as she was unable to sell her works (Rubinstein 59-60). In this way, competition and fear of losing commissions drove male artists to attack their female colleagues.

Artists, both male and female, who were working in Italy in the nineteenth century were building the foundation for their national culture. Often they looked to their native land for topics they could portray. For example, slaves and their fight for freedom were among the popular subject matters and many sculptures, like several of Hosmer's works, were about female subjects: for example, *Hecuba* of Greek mythology or Hosmer's poetic *Song of the Siren*, which presented a fascinating "songstress" happily singing on top of the central piece of the fountain surrounded by water. Other female subjects by Hosmer included *Daphne* (1853), *Medusa* (1854), *Beatrice Cenci* (1857), *Zenobia Queen of Palmyra* (c. 1857), and many others. Another topic for a piece Hosmer herself was enthusiastic about was her statue of *Zenobia in Chains* (1859) in which she wanted to articulate the perfect marriage of the real and the ideal (see Hosmer, *Letters* 192). Further, *The African Sybil* was one of the examples of Hosmer's execution dealing with the topic of the emancipation of African Americans and women. In this way, race and gender often blended in the statues of the female artists. The art works presented both slaves and women as sharing the same yearning for freedom. The statues were powerful silent expressions of women's emancipation.

Another example of a successful US-American female artist who worked on her slave and women sculptures in Italy was Edmonia Lewis. She came to Rome less than a decade after Hosmer. Lewis, the "American sculptress of African descent," was frequently mentioned in *Harper's Bazaar* that followed and reported of her accomplishments in Italy. For instance, in 1873 she was reported to have obtained gold medals for two of her statues (*Sleeping Children* and *Love Caught in a Trap*) at the International Exhibition of Sculpture and Paintings in Naples ("Personal" 531). The subjects of many of her works related to emancipation and freedom, either that of African Americans or women. For instance, soon after her arrival in Rome, she worked on two statues inspired by the Emancipation Proclamation. The

first was *The Freed Woman and Her Child* (1866, unlocated). It depicted "a kneeling woman wearing a slave's turban and chains and offering prayerful thanks to heaven upon learning that she is free" (Rubinstein 53). The other work, *Forever Free* (1867, Howard University, Washington D.C.), presented a freed slave with a smaller black woman kneeling beside him (Rubinstein 53-54). Although the subject was the emancipation of slaves, it is significant that it was a female figure who was set free in Lewis's interpretation. Thus, in both statues racial and gender limits overlapped and were surpassed simultaneously. What has been considered one of her finest works was the life-sized African *Hagar* (1875, National Museum of American Art). Hagar appears in the book of Genesis as a slave/servant/handmaiden of her mistress, Sarah (Sarai). As the story narrates, during the course of her life Hagar became a free woman and her son, Ishmael, became a free man. Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein asserts that Lewis's *Hagar* "powerfully symbolizes the alienation of black women in white society ... Lewis said that she was expressing her 'strong sympathy for all women who have struggled and suffered'" (54). Most probably Lewis was concerned both about racial and gender-inflicted struggle and suffering to an equal extent. As a representative of an African American woman, she had personally experienced both racial and gender-based prejudices.

In a similar way to Lewis, also other transatlantic women sculptors in the early nineteenth century linked the figure of a woman with that of a slave to underscore how women were confined by gender definitions (Campbell and Kean 192). With their statues of chained women or women celebrating their freedom, the artists addressed patriarchal tenets of gender. In addition, the statues of female sculptors depicting women slaves can be seen as forms of self-presentation. The slave and woman became so intertwined in these artistic presentations that it was rather obvious how the artist's intention was to equate one with the other, i.e., race with gender. As Charmaine Nelson affirms, "The example of the slave's marginalization within slavery was used as a metaphor for white women within patriarchy" (35). The same metaphor of women confined in patriarchal society was present in many of Lewis' works, thus making it evident how the marginalization of women concerned both African American and white women. Indeed, the artists and their works were very much involved in the events of their time — abolitionism, racial discourse, and the New Woman debates. It can be argued that in the central position was the figure of a woman both in their works depicting slaves and in their own lives as female artists. Thus, for the transatlantic sculptresses, breaking through the restrictive claims of gender as determined through the parameters of patriarchal society was of utmost importance. With their statues and the example of their courageous lives they raised important questions about patriarchal power and gender demarcation. Fearlessly these women artists cast away conventional female role models and adventured into the unknown as they articulated gender-based topics in their works.

It was the impressive *Hagar* that Frances Willard saw in Lewis's studio during her visit to Rome in January of 1870. Willard was touring Europe during 1868-70 together with her friend Kate Jackson and recorded her impressions in more than twenty diaries written during her European tour. She used the notes as the basis of the many lectures and speeches she gave on women's rights and emancipation upon her return to the United States. In a similar way to Lewis, Willard was concerned about women who were trying to break free from their socio-political limitations. On 4 January 1870 she registered in her journal the visit to Lewis's studio. Willard wrote that

Edmonia Lewis, "the 'colored' lady from Boston has a pretty little studio very pleasantly located on our street, & her work as well as her manners are very pleasing. I took especial pleasure in my visit, because, it is particularly agreeable to see one who, like her, occupies an exceptional & not a desirable position in the world's estimate, gifted with the power to create beauty & harmony for itself — blessed with that sweetest of all solaces — an engrossing & congenial occupation ... She has a full-size statue of Hagar in the moment of her despair — her most ambitious work, & one full of promise for her mature fame ... A privilege this of her genius to which many a wealthy traveler vainly aspires ... I took "solid comfort" in the contemplation of this girl, so free, so worthily at work, so thoroughly appreciated for what she has done & will do. An anomaly it is indeed, to find at Rome — the most conservative, most middle-age city of Europe — the daughter of a proscribed race leading a true & perfectly untrammelled life — ... going her way quietly free as air — just as one day all men & women are to be. (328-29)

As is evident from the above passage, Willard admired Lewis's power and talent to create beauty. She considered her gifted, with genius. And she recognized her doubly challenging situation as a representative of what were considered an inferior "race" and inferior gender. Yet, despite the socially

set limitations, this African American woman was obtaining commissions and executing statues as any artist with great success. To Willard, this strong, good-looking woman who was ambitious in her work was exceedingly capable of creating excellent busts. She was using her potential to the fullest. In her work, she had found self-expression, self-realization, and self-fulfillment. Overall, according to Willard's testimony, Lewis was full of promise for future success and fame. Moreover, she had formed friendships with such leading artists of the period as the poet Longfellow and the composer Liszt, whose busts she had made. Many, as Willard wrote, aspired to obtain what Lewis possessed – genius combined with an opportunity to create something grand and beautiful. What seemed to impress Willard the most was the freedom that Lewis' accomplishments brought her as a woman and artist. Indeed, Lewis was leading "a true & perfectly untrammelled life" and "going her way quietly free as air," just as one day all men and women should (Willard 329). With such statements Willard recognized the future potential of realizing equal rights for all, regardless of gender and race. Women like Lewis and Willard herself were both working to accomplish such lofty ideals.

To render the figure of the transatlantic woman and her freedom in Italy even more evident, Willard made comparisons between US-American and Italian women and, for example, in October 1869 she wrote in her diary that the lady proprietor of her pension, Madame Sopranzi, complained about the "backward state of Italy among the nations, & especially the condition of our own sex" (321). According to the Madame, a female entrepreneur herself, there was not a single lady in all Italy "of the age of any one of us & unmarried who would dare travel as we have done for the last few weeks" (321). Willard quoted Madame Sopranzi as having said that "'You Americans are as far ahead of us,' she said, 'as we are in advance of the Turkish women'" (321-22). Hence, if Italian women were behind the progressive US-Americans, there were women in other countries, such as Turkey, lagging even further behind in their emancipation, in their efforts to obtain socio-political rights and freedom from patriarchal rule. During her stay in Rome, la Signora Sopranzi introduced Willard to her female friends who, surprisingly, saw women's education as a hindrance because it hurt a woman's marriage prospects (Gordon 80). "Life gives us just one choice" they explained "to be wives or to be nuns" (Gordon 82). Instead, the opportunities US-American girls had, according to Italian women, rendered them brave (Gordon 82). Yet, despite the admiration, Italian women seemed to struggle to accept the modern women. They thought it not only "crazy" but "a folly and a crime" for women to become doctors, while they found it "alarming" that there were fifty thousand lady teachers in the United States. This to them was a sign of women usurping authority over men (Gordon 83-84). It can be argued, then, that although they criticized women who were entering the public domain and working in professions reserved only for men, in more general terms Italian women protested against change. Moreover, in their own eyes, they were not chained to domestic obedience. They merely disapproved of ambitious women who left their traditional place to enter and compete in what was considered men's domain. In this way, women themselves were refuting the emancipated models as they failed to perceive them as progressive. It can be argued, then, that Italian women, to Willard, seemed oppressed but their situation, according to her, was due to their own limited vision and their incapacity to accept the modern emancipated woman.

Willard's desire to devote her life to women's rights matured during her European tour of 1868-70. In these years, her determination to become involved in the "Woman Question" upon her return home grew stronger. Indeed, she dedicated her future career to the cause of Prohibition while she simultaneously worked to institute reforms and to enlarge the scope of the Temperance Union to include woman's suffrage and labor reforms. Her speech "The New Chivalry" delivered at Charles Fowler's Centenary Church in 1871 was dedicated to European women and based on her journal entries. American girls, in Willard's view, were "the fortunate daughters of the dear Home Land" who dramatically differed from the "sad-faced" women across the seas (Gordon 78). Such transatlantic women as Hosmer and Lewis can be seen as embodiments of these "fortunate daughters" of America who lived with admirable courage. As pioneer artists and modern women they found happiness, not in marriage, but in self-realization, as artists working in Italy. These women personified the New Woman of the New World, the future promise of educational and professional opportunities for women. They corresponded to the vision of the late nineteenth-century socialist feminists, who "insisted on a woman's rights over her own person and property, and on women's equality with men in the social sphere via education, increased employment opportunities, and political enfranchisement" (Pykett 38).

With hard work, enthusiasm and determination the nineteenth-century transatlantic women paved the way as pioneers in women's emancipation. Their exemplary lives and successful careers represented the dawning of a new era epitomized in the figure of the New Woman.

In conclusion, the image of the US-American women pioneers was not necessarily a presentation of radical and forceful women. Instead, the women who were opening the doors for future development were often depicted as modest yet determined. This kind of an image appears, for example, in the following quote from Georg Brandes, who saw the embodiment of the New Woman in the US-American sculptress Vinnie Ream: "She was no fine lady, she was an American girl, who had not attained her rank by birth or through inherited riches, but had fought for it herself with a talent that had made its way to the surface without early training, through days and night of industry, and a mixture of enthusiasm and determination" (Brandes qtd. in Rubinstein 66). These courageous women artists went after their dreams and realized their ambitions without being concerned about or influenced by public opinion. They surpassed what were considered the limits set for them as women and as artists. With their example they started to shift the parameters set for gender-based social norms, thus leading other women who followed in their footsteps to explore and express their full potential.

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