

In March 1913, on the occasion of a retrospective exhibition of the sculpture of Bessie Potter Vonnoh at the Brooklyn Institute, the author of an article for the museum bulletin wrote of the sculptor: “She has been doing in the statuette what Daniel C. French is doing in full size figures, and what Abbott Thayer has been doing in painting, using the fundamental and subconscious spirit of the classic masters, but interpreting the life of today in the terms of its own individuality, language and character, giving to her figures strength, grace and beauty in their most admirable modern forms, and above all giving to her sculptures an intellectual refinement, a moral significance and a spirituality that have been found in the art of no preceding period. In her work, sculpture is being freed from the imitative methods of the past and is becoming more and more an expression of modern life.”¹ By 1913 the perception of Vonnoh as a consummate interpreter of certain cherished aspects of modern American experience in a distinctly individual mode had been in place for nearly two decades. Although she dwelt on the themes of American women and children found in abundant contemporary paintings, Vonnoh was recognized as the first in the nation to render such everyday themes in sculpture and was thought to have brought to them her own exquisitely sensitive approach. Her membership in the most prestigious professional societies, innumerable awards, critical acclaim, and noteworthy patronage attest to the considerable esteem of her contemporaries.

In retrospect, our knowledge that Vonnoh’s 1913 show—her second solo exhibition—precisely coincided with the first International Exhibition of Modern Art, a display of the most avant-garde European sculpture across Brooklyn Bridge at the Sixty-ninth Regiment Armory, makes her statuettes appear markedly conservative.² American sculptors, however, were slow to adopt the abstract forms of the European Modernists, and American art enthusiasts were even slower to accept such art.³ American bronzes did not truly begin to find their audience until the first decade of the twentieth century. In fact, the 1910s saw the greatest national interest in the art of small bronze sculpture, and many talented artists took advantage of the flourishing market. Although much excellent work resulted, the subsequent veneration of the avant-garde spelled the neglect of the American bronze in the annals of art history. Over the last three decades, scholars and museums have

Daphne, modeled 1910 or 1911; cast 1915

Bronze (on original wood base), 11 ⁷/₁₆ x 3 ³/₁₆ x 3 ³/₁₆ in. (29 x 9 x 8.5 cm)

Signed (left, top of base): *Bessie Potter Vonnoh*; inscribed (back right, top of base): *no. V*;

(right, edge of base): *ROMAN BRONZE WORKS N.Y.*

Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts; Bequest of Theodore T. Ellis, Worcester, Mass., 1940.152

taken a renewed and sustained interest in the art of Vonnoh’s generation, but the sculptors remain comparatively little studied.

It would not be fair to imply that Bessie Potter Vonnoh has been ignored by contemporary scholars, but her work has been considered only in the context of surveys, collection catalogues, and broad discussions of late-nineteenth-century American art.⁴ More recent publications on the artist, none exceeding five or six pages, add only marginally to Wayne Craven’s brief biography and assessment in his groundbreaking *Sculpture in America* of 1968.⁵ The recent examinations of her career are limited by their scope and arrangement. For example, Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein’s invaluable reference work, *American Women Sculptors*, rectifies gender imbalances in the sculpture literature; however, it does not adequately situate Vonnoh’s work in the context of the men with whom she studied, exhibited, and competed.⁶ For reasons probably relating to Vonnoh’s date of birth, Rubinstein includes her in the chapter on the Gilded Age, rather than in the following chapter concerning small bronzes and garden statuary, Vonnoh’s fields of expertise.

Several factors have contributed to the lagging scholarship on the women sculptors of Vonnoh’s time. First and foremost, sculpture remains marginalized within the field of American art history, leaving vast terrain virtually untouched. While the monument has received increasingly serious consideration because of its political ramifications, the small bronze and the garden figure, associated with the domestic environment, have generated far less critical inquiry.⁷ Because the women of Vonnoh’s generation produced fewer monuments than studio bronzes and garden statuary, few of these artists—with the notable exception of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth (1880–1980), the subject of a thorough and beautifully illustrated new monograph—have been accorded the same level of scholarship as their male colleagues.⁸

Although feminist art historians have reinstated many women artists to the canon, Vonnoh has garnered relatively little attention from them. It is perhaps because her lifestyle was rather conventional and her approach academic. One could argue that gender discrimination, while unquestionably affecting Vonnoh’s career and professional decisions, did not prevent her from meeting her potential. She embraced subjects that were perceived as appropriate to women artists, and

her work enjoyed broad appeal and critical accolades. Nevertheless, it is worth considering how Vonnoh effectively worked the system in order to succeed. Even beyond the fine quality of her work, the rich issues raised by her sculpture and her history merit closer attention.

This exhibition and catalogue aim to introduce the public to an artist they may already know and love without realizing who she was. Recognizing the allure of Vonnoh's statuettes for the public, some museums today offer reproductions in their shops while the sculptures themselves languish in storerooms. Other institutions have shown fresh enthusiasm for Vonnoh's sculpture by acquiring examples for their collections. These include: the High Museum of Art; the Amon Carter Museum; the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens; the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester; and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The large number of Vonnoh's works in museum collections, most acquired during her lifetime, make this exhibition and publication particularly worthwhile.

Although Bessie Potter Vonnoh's statuettes are now commonly ascribed to the so-called Genteel Tradition, American artists, critics, and patrons of the mid-1890s widely viewed them as "modern." Innovative in several respects, they were embraced for their refreshing unaffectedness, vibrancy, and encapsulation of contemporary American life. Because the majority of Vonnoh's early works are lost and may not survive, scholars have largely ignored them. A study of her early works, however, provides a crucial understanding of how the sculptor came to produce her better-known statuettes and how her later efforts were understood by her contemporaries. This study explores Vonnoh's early work in depth, examining its origins, critical reception, sources, and patronage.

A consideration of the early life and work of Bessie Potter Vonnoh sheds light on art in Chicago, itself an underserved field of study. In Chicago, where the artist's story begins, her statuettes fulfilled the art world's desire for something it could claim as its own—something New York, Boston, and Philadelphia did not possess. Chicago's artists and their supporters were engaged in an uphill battle against the city's reputation for crude materialism and an utter lack of sophistication. Chicago's Realist authors, Henry Blake Fuller and Theodore Dreiser, earned their fame at Chicago's expense by casting the city in a negative light. Unlike the writers and architects, few Chicago painters and sculptors produced strikingly original work precisely because they felt compelled to squelch the view of the city as uncultured, an attitude that bred conservatism. By contrast, Vonnoh's early sculpture seemed remarkably fresh and exciting. When New York took note of her plaster statuettes of American women at the 1895 exhibitions of the Society of American Artists and the National Sculpture Society, Chicago beamed with pride. But the honeymoon was short lived. Much to the city's regret, in 1898, shortly before marrying the painter Robert Vonnoh, the sculptor made the inevitable move to New York, where her reputation was already firmly established.

From the turn of the century through at least the 1920s, many American artists and critics saw Bessie Potter Vonnoh as a leader in the field of small bronzes. Writing for the National Sculpture Society, Adeline Adams proclaimed the sculptor "the originator of an American genre, in which small size does not for a moment imply either a trifling imagination or a petty rendering."⁹ The Sculpture Society energetically promoted small bronzes in the hope that high-quality sculpture for the home at a modest price would eventually improve public taste for monumental works. To the society, this goal was both a moral and a practical imperative.¹⁰ As monument commissions were insufficient to support the rapidly escalating number of sculptors, many artists turned to small bronzes for vital income. For most of the sculptors producing small bronzes, these works were ancillary to the larger public sculpture they produced. Vonnoh, however, was a notable exception. Committed to making affordable sculpture suited for the home, she was among the first American sculptors to choose deliberately to devote her most intense creative energy to small bronzes. This study draws together material on the exhibition and collecting of bronzes in America and compares Vonnoh's practices with those of other sculptors.

Ultimately, Vonnoh's reputation did not rest on small bronzes alone. Her oeuvre is also distinguished by a small yet intriguing group of terra-cotta statuettes and commendable portrait busts. In the 1920s and 1930s Vonnoh became one of the most celebrated garden sculptors in the country. Prestigious public commissions for the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Bird Fountain at Oyster Bay and the Frances Hodgson Burnett Fountain in Central Park marked the culmination of her long career.

This reevaluation of the sculpture of Bessie Potter Vonnoh aims first to establish the basic facts of her life and career, extensively utilizing newspapers and magazines, the correspondence of her many friends, and other primary materials. This study analyzes Vonnoh's sculpture more precisely than any other to date and considers its amalgam of sources, the critical literature, and the vicissitudes of her reputation. Furthermore, it examines the close relationship Vonnoh's subjects and her treatment of them reveal with paintings by her contemporaries, thus rectifying the neglect caused by the usual segregation of painting and sculpture studies. It serves to correct the myriad factual inaccuracies of earlier publications and to provide guidance to museums, collectors, and dealers.¹¹ Situating the work of Bessie Potter Vonnoh in context, this book and the exhibition it accompanies represent a beginning at understanding her sculpture and that of her contemporaries and suggest abundant topics for research in the future.



“An Embryo Sculptor”

Onahotema, “she gives with an open hand” in the language of the Choctaw nation, was the prescient middle name of Bessie Potter. Born in Saint Louis, Missouri, on 17 August 1872, Bessie Potter was the only child of Ohio natives Alexander C. Potter (1836–1874) and Mary Elizabeth McKenney (1841–1932) (fig. 1). Substantive biographical information about Alexander C. Potter has proven elusive. Brief notes in his daughter’s hand place his birth in Cleveland around Christmas of 1836, a date approximately confirmed by subsequent census records.¹ While visiting his cousin Robert Potter in Maumee City, Ohio, Alexander met Mary Elizabeth McKenney—famously known as Molly—one of three daughters of Almeron McKenney (1812–1897), the son of Scottish immigrants, and Jane (Tibbitt) McKenney (ca. 1818–1903).² Molly and Alexander were married in the McKenney family home on 11 September 1861 and settled in Maumee City for about eight years. The Ohio state census for 1870 shows the young couple living in the home of Molly’s parents along with her younger siblings, James, Melissa, and Stephen. Potter appears as a “manufacturer.”³ By 1872, the year of Bessie’s birth, he and Molly had migrated west to St. Louis, where he is listed in a city directory as a salesman for Stewart and Needham, dealers in farm machinery. They resided with proprietor Hiram K. Needham at 1034 Dolman Street.⁴ Potter is listed at the reconfigured concern of Needham, Martin and Company the following year, but by 1874 he had changed employers to Adolph C. Taylor of Taylor and Company, vendor of “agricultural implements and steam engines.”⁵ This arrangement was short lived.

Sometime in 1874 Alexander Potter died in an accident, described later in his daughter’s notes: “Killed while driving a pair of horses across Chicago

Fig. 1
Mary Elizabeth (McKenney) Potter
ca. 1900
Photograph
Bessie Potter Vonnoh Album,
Private Collection



(opposite) Bessie Potter, ca. 1890, Photograph, Courtesy of the Bessie Potter Vonnoh Papers, ca. 1860–1987, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

and Alton R.R. crossing at East St. Louis. He had turned to call back to warn a friend who was following evidently thinking he was safely across when the train struck the rear of his carriage and he was thrown against the engine and instantly killed. The horses which were pets of his and had been trained by him did not move but waited to be led away. Buried in St. Louis.”⁶ Throughout her life Bessie acutely felt the loss of the father she barely knew and treasured the mementos her mother gave her. Curious about the origins of her penchant for art, she inquired about Alexander’s inclinations and learned that, although he was not a visual artist, he had played the guitar and other musical instruments. More apropos, her mother said he was “deft with his hands.” It pleased her to think she inherited from her father her gift for working with her hands.

Shortly after her father’s death, two-year-old Bessie became gravely ill. She never knew the cause of her illness; decades later, she called it “mysterious.”⁷ Although we will never be certain, one might postulate that she either suffered a post-traumatic reaction to the loss of her father or contracted polio in the years

before the disease became epidemic in the United States.⁸ In an autobiographical article written in 1925 for the women’s magazine *Delineator*, she vividly recounted her treatment and suffering: “I endured years of slow torture, sometimes encased in plaster casts, sometimes held by straps from the ceiling in an upright position, sometimes lying exhausted in a wheelchair. During those invalid years my inactivity stunted me so that to-day I am child-size, standing only about four feet eight inches from the floor. At last, in my tenth year, the doctor then attending gave me up. I heard his death sentence: ‘I won’t come again. Nothing can be done. Make her as comfortable as you can.’ But instead of dying I gradually began to get well. Why, no one ever understood. I only know that when all treatments and fussing ceased I slowly began to mend.”⁹ Potter later recalled how she tried to stretch her legs in defiance of the agonizing pain and, eventually, began to walk around her bed, gripping it for support.¹⁰ To cope with this misery, she acquired a subtly ironic sense of humor. However, more important to our story is that, once recovered, she reacted to memories of her childhood infirmity by developing an almost religious devotion to the physical activity of modeling in clay.¹¹

Fig. 2
Bessie Potter, ca. 1884
Photograph
Courtesy of Ellen S. Zilin



As the only child, moreover an ill one, of a woman widowed young who never remarried, Bessie (fig. 2) forged an exceptionally close bond with her mother. Without question, Molly Potter was one of the most influential people in her daughter’s life, but there is frustratingly little to provide a sense of her character, interests, or ideas. Whether or not Molly went to college—her niece, Lulette Thompson, believed she attended Oberlin—she was certainly keenly intelligent and set no obstacles before her daughter’s pursuit of an unconventional career.¹² Although described as somewhat vain, she unflaggingly supported and encouraged with an iron will what she perceived to be Bessie’s interests. Molly’s devotion allowed her daughter to become a sculptor and to flourish in her profession. Not surprisingly, however, her possessiveness sometimes interfered with Bessie’s personal relations. With infrequent lapses, mother and daughter shared the same dwelling until Molly’s death in the 1930s.

CHICAGO

By 1877 Molly and Bessie Potter had joined members of the McKenney family in Chicago, a vital industrial city that was quite literally rising from the ashes of the Great Fire, which only six years earlier had consumed twenty-eight miles of urban streets. With lightning speed, Chicago had grown from a frontier outpost in the 1830s to a metropolis more than one million strong by the time of the 1893 World’s Fair. The city’s unique geography, which provided access via lakes and rivers to broad swaths of the expanded nation, made it the optimum site for a booming transportation and commercial center. Chicago’s growth exploded with the construction of the railroads beginning in the early 1850s. The Great Fire of 1871 barely slowed the city’s development. Although thousands of residents lost their homes and suffered tragic circumstances, most Chicagoans, amazingly, were undaunted by the fire’s devastation in their boundless optimism about their city’s future. The fire provided a symbolic opportunity for regeneration.¹³ Constant change became one of the city’s most notable characteristics. The triumph of speed and efficiency over manners and culture made late-nineteenth-century Chicago seem at once the city most engaged with the present and the vision of the future.¹⁴ Bessie Potter’s career was thoroughly bound with the relentless energy and social fabric of late-nineteenth-century Chicago.

The McKenneys had moved from Ohio to Chicago to partake in the city’s industrial opportunities. Almeron McKenney, Bessie’s grandfather, was an inventor who took out a patent in 1871 for hardware to improve the efficiency of the railroads; in the 1880s he ran the McKenney Tubular Rail Manufacturing Company in Chicago.¹⁵ With a toddler to support, Molly Potter, at least for a time, found herself among the countless women who took advantage of the expanded opportunities for employment afforded by the city’s explosive commercial development. She

took a position as a clerk on her arrival in Chicago and held it for at least two years.¹⁶ It is unknown with whom she and Bessie lived initially at 355 Wabash Avenue, but a directory for 1878 to 1879 finds them with Molly's widowed brother, James S. McKenney, then the president of the Sigwalt Sewing Machine Company. They resided at 1655 Prairie Avenue, in an elegant, upper-middle-class neighborhood of Italianate homes on Chicago's south side.¹⁷ For reasons perhaps relating to the Sigwalt Company's impending failure, by 1880 they had relocated with James to 414 Superior Street, where Almeron and Jane McKenney then resided.¹⁸ As they employed two servants, Rosa McCathry and Kate Sullivan, it seems they were living quite comfortably, but they did not stay there long. For reasons that are not understood, a peripatetic lifestyle marked Bessie's childhood.¹⁹ By 1882 the entire family moved to 38 Harrison Street; by 1884 to 2430 Wabash Avenue; and in 1884 or 1885 to the burgeoning commuter suburb of Englewood, where they settled at last at 7120 Harvard Avenue. That the constituents of the household remained essentially the same offered some measure of stability.²⁰ Nevertheless, the disruption of moving house every few years surely made lasting childhood friendships next to impossible. As an only child surrounded by adults, Bessie occupied herself with drawing, making paper dolls, and other solitary activities that stimulated her creative impulses.²¹ She developed a comfortable rapport with her elders and exceptional poise, traits that served her well in the early years of her career when she depended on portrait commissions for her livelihood.

In June of 1880, when Bessie was seven years old, she was reportedly attending school, but little more is documented of her early education.²² In her 1925 autobiography for the *Delineator*, the artist described her attendance at the Cook County Normal School in Englewood.²³ Presumably, she enrolled there around 1884 or 1885, shortly after her family had moved to the neighborhood, and attended for only a year or two. The Cook County Normal School was founded in 1867 to educate teachers for the public schools, but it expanded to include preparation for business and professional careers. By 1875 the school reportedly had grown from its initial 32 pupils to 276, and in 1883 Francis W. Parker, a progressive and experimental educator, became principal. Parker, it is said, "developed an approach to education that rejected rote learning and enlisted the natural curiosity of children in the schooling process."²⁴

At the school Potter made her first attempts at modeling under Kristian Schneider, a German sculptor later engaged as an ornamental modeler by the architects Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan.²⁵ Although little of his teachings made a lasting impression, except his repeated advice to "make it smootin mit your finker," she reveled in her sculpture lessons. Years later she recalled, "The modeling-class was my delight. We copied casts of fruit and flowers and made reliefs in wax from pictures—preposterous things."²⁶ Those "preposterous things" fell into the category of fancywork, acceptable creative pursuits for young women amateurs and the kind of work a teacher would be expected to bring before female classes. Nevertheless, these activities were important for Potter as they led her to discover

a penchant for modeling. "The work enchanted me," she recalled. "The touch of the clay and the joy of creating gave me a deep sense of contentment." Although initially aspiring to a career as a painter, Potter later stated that "even at an early age I think form, rather than color, appealed to my imagination."²⁷ With youthful enthusiasm, she set about decorating household objects and pursued a few small commissions from family friends, including a sculpted head of a political candidate for a campaign cane. Her affinity for modeling did not go unnoticed, although writers tended to mythologize Potter's artistic beginnings. Perhaps there was a nugget of truth in an enthusiast's claim that "the deftness with which she pinched and patted it [the clay] into shape marked her, in the eyes of the principal, Colonel Francis Parker, and Art Instructor Schneider, as an embryo sculptor."²⁸

THE ART STUDENT

It was clear to Potter very early in life that she would work to earn a living. She later mused, "I laugh to think of how one of the reasons I chose an art career was because my dear mother felt that I was not strong enough for a commercial job where I would have to sit all day in a dark room. So I was launched into sculpture which means that I must stand all day with my arms stuck out at queer angles trying to do the most delicate embroidery upon clay."²⁹ Potter attributed her decision to become a professional sculptor to a fortuitous visit with her mother to the shop of an Italian plaster caster when she was fourteen years old.³⁰ Her evident fascination with the caster's wares and métier led the proprietor to introduce her to the sculptor Lorado Taft (1860–1936), who became her sole acknowledged mentor. She, in turn, became one of Taft's favorite pupils and a lifelong friend.

In 1886 Taft was in the early stages of a long and distinguished career equally devoted to the making and teaching of sculpture and, with the zeal of a missionary, to the education of the public about art. Born in Elmwood, Illinois, Taft had attended Illinois Industrial University (later University of Illinois), then from 1880 to 1883 pursued the rigorous course of sculpture studies at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. After completing the three-year program and two additional years in France, Taft had returned to the Midwest thoroughly schooled in the modern French methods of sculpture.³¹ If disdainful of what he perceived as the poverty of moral values behind some French sculpture, he firmly believed the French far exceeded all others in technical excellence.³² When Taft met Bessie Potter in 1886, he had just been appointed the first instructor of modeling at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Because Molly Potter could afford to subsidize only one year of schooling for her daughter—tuition at the Art Institute of Chicago was twenty-five dollars per half-year term, approximately \$550 in today's currency—the unfailingly generous Taft offered to hire the budding sculptor to work on Saturdays as a studio assistant.

Taft employed students to assist him with building armatures, plaster casting, and a variety of other activities, both to increase his own productivity and because he firmly believed in the medieval and Renaissance apprenticeship system. Potter's acceptance into his studio was contingent on mastery of her first assignment, a copy of a cast of the eye of Michelangelo's *David*.³³ She was soon joined in the studio by Julia Bracken (1870–1942), another eager young student who went on to a productive career in Los Angeles. On her new mentor's advice, Potter began her studies at the Art Institute in the fall of 1886 at the age of fourteen.³⁴

The Art Institute of Chicago grew out of the Chicago Academy of Design, which originated in the 1860s but lost momentum with the fire. With a new sense of purpose, the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts was founded in 1879 and took the name the Art Institute of Chicago in 1882.³⁵ The institute was intended by its trustees, the elite businessmen of the city, to function as a mutually nurturing school and museum which, by producing and presenting exemplary handcrafted works of art, would ennoble a materialistic society and reinvent the image of Chicago as a place of high cultural standards.³⁶ The rapidly expanding resources of the museum and school offered surprisingly rich opportunities for young artists to study a wide range of art from the past, as well as contemporary works. By the time Potter arrived, the Art Institute had embarked on an ambitious exhibition schedule that included traveling exhibitions from New York and shows of work by members of the fledgling local art societies.³⁷

Sculpture played a central role in the Art Institute's offerings. Annual exhibitions of contemporary American art were launched in 1888, at first encompassing only paintings but soon expanding to include a small selection of sculpture, mostly by Chicago residents.³⁸ Also on the docket from the earliest years were scholarly exhibitions of historical sculpture. During the years Potter attended, the permanent collection grew by leaps and bounds. With Taft's guidance and the directorship of William M. R. French, the brother of the sculptor Daniel Chester French, sculpture was accorded a special place in the institute's collecting. By 1891, Potter's final year in the program, a reporter could describe the Art Institute's collection of plaster casts of sculpture as "one of the largest in the country[,] . . . five hundred and twelve pieces in all."³⁹ Practical instruction at the Art Institute was typically augmented by lecture series such as that for January 1890, which included two talks by Taft: "Clay, Plaster and Marble, the Processes of Sculpture" and "Early Greek Sculpture." For ten weeks, from February through April of that year, Taft was scheduled to deliver "an extra course of Evening Lectures upon Sculpture, Classic and Modern, illustrated by the stereopticon."⁴⁰

Like Taft, most of the instructors of drawing and painting were products of French academic training, although a few teachers had studied in Munich. Principally through the influence of the French-trained drawing instructor John Vanderpoel (1857–1911)—a consummate academic draftsman who later wrote the widely used manual *The Human Figure* (1907)—the curriculum, like that of the

École des Beaux-Arts, was based on rigorous discipline in drawing from the Antique and then from life. Mastery of drawing was a prerequisite for either painting or sculpture.

In the autumn of 1886 Potter enrolled in the Elementary Class, described in an institute circular as "chiefly early charcoal practice from antique fragments in outline and general light-and-shade, together with pencil practice from blocks and familiar objects." Possibly for financial reasons, Potter did not register the following year but waited until February 1889 to complete the Elementary Class. Promoted in April 1889 to the Intermediate level—more advanced drawing from the Antique in pencil as well as pen and ink—she received an honorable mention in October. Potter graduated one year later to the Antique Class, described as: "Heads and figures from cast in full light and shade. Still life in colors. Modeling and designing recommended. Students of this class are often permitted to make studies from life without being promoted."⁴¹ As no student work has survived, her progress can be measured only by her timely advancement and commendable grades.⁴² In spite of this exhaustive training or perhaps because of it, the practice of drawing seems to have held limited appeal to her. There is not a single extant drawing by her hand; by all accounts, she worked directly in clay before the model.⁴³

At the Art Institute, Potter's gender did not pose a significant disadvantage, certainly not to the extent likely at an East Coast institution or even as a sculpture student in Paris. Until 1897 women were excluded from what was then widely considered optimal for a sculptor's education: admission to the École des Beaux-Arts. Moreover, art instruction in the French capital was fully segregated, and women's classes both cost more and received fewer instructor-visits than did their male counterparts.⁴⁴ In the United States, separate education was reserved for classes with a nude model. Women composed the overwhelming majority of the student body at the Art Institute, where most students pursued the decorative and commercial arts to enter Chicago's thriving industries; in 1891 more than three-quarters of the 433 total students were women.⁴⁵ In Gilded Age America, the identification of women as the guardians of culture encouraged large numbers of women to pursue art studies. The late nineteenth century was also a time when many professions, including both arts and sciences, were formalized through the development of higher education and professional societies. For painters and sculptors, the ascendancy of academic art, which favored the mastery of the human form by thorough study over earlier notions of innate genius, opened doors for women artists who sought parity with men. Because some social niceties had eluded Chicago as the city met the demands of its commercial whirl, there were fewer impediments to women entering the workforce and attitudes were somewhat more relaxed. The Art Institute faculty provided role models for its female students; there were four women on the drawing and painting faculty, an unusually large number for the period. By contrast, the National Academy of Design in New York did not hire a single female instructor until after 1900.⁴⁶ There was one distinct advantage



Fig. 3
Ernest Hergt
*Lorado Taft's Class at the Art
Institute of Chicago*, ca. 1896
Photograph in Lorado Taft Papers
courtesy of the University of Illinois
Archives

enjoyed by Chicago's male art students: the men's life class was so much smaller that the instructor could provide more individual attention.

Constantly surrounded by female students, Taft was dubbed "the father of Chicago's women sculptors" (fig. 3). He heartily offered them the fullest extent of his support and encouragement—so much so, in fact, that he came under fire for lacking objectivity in his critical writings on their work.⁴⁷ It has been correctly noted that, in his *History of American Sculpture* published in 1903, Taft perpetuated the deeply entrenched misconception of the woman sculptor's incompetence to model the male figure; yet, this attitude does not appear to have impeded his teaching of women.⁴⁸ Taft's estimation of the women sculptors of Potter's generation seems remarkably enlightened for a male artist of his time.⁴⁹ In contrast, his fellow Beaux-Arts graduate, Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907), upheld the stereotypical distinctions between male and female artists used to dismiss women's art as biologically inferior and "amateurish. He wrote, "I noticed what others have discovered before me, that unquestionably women learn more rapidly than men, but that subsequently men gain in strength and proceed, whereas women remain, making less progress. Men always seem to compose better than women, and are more creative. Women can more easily copy what is before them."⁵⁰ Taft's liberal attitude allowed Potter not only to master the craft of sculpture but to fearlessly experiment to discover her own voice.

Potter's school transcript suggests she entered Taft's modeling class in the spring term of 1890. Although Taft later contributed several innovations to the teaching of sculpture, there is little concrete information on his methods in his first few years as an educator.⁵¹ Potter was observed making a "figure in the round" for the annual student exhibition by the columnist for the *Evening Post*, who wrote on 14 May 1890 that Taft's students "have their model posing every day, and several of them are working from 8 o'clock in the morning until they are no longer able to see at night."⁵² By June Potter had accomplished an impressive array of work. Awarded the "Special Prize" for a group of modeled works, she received a copy of Hippolyte Adolphe Taine's *Lectures on Art*.⁵³ After the graduation exercises, the critic for the *Inter-Ocean* remarked, "Miss Bessie Potter, one of the most cultured and promising students of the Institute, was unable to be present on account of illness. When the exercises in the hall were over the audience adjourned to the class rooms, where Miss Potter's group of plaster work was the center of attraction. There were fifteen pieces in all. A large study in clay, the figure of an athlete, stood pathetically incomplete, just as the student left it perforce of ill health. Its noble outline showed the imprint of a genius, even in rough condition. . . . The other works of Miss Potter consist of various little sketches, some in relief and others in bust."⁵⁴ The only visual record of these early works is an indistinct photograph, which reveals nothing of their quality, published in the *Graphic*, a Chicago weekly (fig. 4).⁵⁵ Potter's sculpture consisted of full figures, reliefs, and busts in assorted sizes, a number of which were copied after plaster casts of such well-known Antique statuary as the Parthenon pediment figures and the *Venus de Milo*.

The late nineteenth century saw the proliferation of illustrated magazines and newspapers that turned artists into personalities. For the first time, the newspapers, nearly all of which devoted weekly columns to the local art scene, became aware of Potter and her work; they began eagerly charting her progress, turning her into a media darling for the duration of her Chicago years.⁵⁶ The critics took note of her activities in the early months of 1891, when she and her student companions, unable to pay models, took turns sitting for each other. On 30 January 1891 the following notice appeared in the *Evening Post*: "Miss Bessie Potter, one of the students at the Art Institute, has a very cleverly modeled low relief portrait of Miss Bessie Brooks on exhibition at Abbott's. This work is full of promise, and, as the artist is still a young girl, there is every reason to believe that there is a



Fig. 4
Group of Student Works, 1889–90
Plaster
Probably destroyed
Photograph: "Decorative Work of
the Woman's Building," *Graphic* 5
(5 December 1891): 372; Courtesy of
the Newberry Library, Chicago

most successful future in store for her.⁵⁷ Regrettably, the relief of Bessie Brooks, the daughter of the Chicago painter Alden Finney Brooks, has not been located. Also lost is the portrait bust of Potter completed in March by Carol (Carrie) Brooks (1871–1944), Bessie Brooks’s better-known sister.⁵⁸

Both of these sculptures appeared in the annual display of student work at the close of the 1891 academic year, but no work in the exhibition won the applause accorded Potter’s standing figure, *Echo*. The only located photograph of *Echo* (fig. 5), printed in the *Graphic*, is hazy. Taken while Potter was modeling the figure, the photograph may show the work prior to its final form.⁵⁹ It reveals a robust, moderately idealized nude with her chin raised and hand held to her ear.

The story of the nymph Echo appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In the first episode, a jealous Juno punishes the talkative Echo for dalliances with Jupiter by limiting the use of her voice; as the result of Juno’s vengeance, Echo “repeats the last words spoken, and gives back the sounds she has heard.”⁶⁰ Echo later falls hopelessly in love with Narcissus but is cruelly rejected by him. Retiring to a cave, she withers away until there is nothing left but her voice. Potter appears to have chosen to suggest the moment when Echo, unable to speak first, listens anxiously for Narcissus’s voice in her futile effort to win his affections.

Echo was infrequently depicted in sculpture, but Potter may have known a marble of the ill-fated nymph created in the early 1860s by Larkin Goldsmith Mead (1835–1910), an American expatriate residing in Florence. Mead’s *Echo* differs in its highly idealized, abstract, Neoclassical style, but the pose—albeit less active—is patently intended to illustrate the same moment in the story.⁶¹

A more striking stylistic parallel, particularly for the Baroque proportions of the body, is a work of the Italian sculptor Adolfo Apolloni (1845–1923). *American Mythology* (fig. 6) is a paean to American modernity in the form of an allegorical nude holding a telephone to her ear.⁶² Apolloni was well known in America, as he had spent several years as an art instructor in Boston and had married a woman from Providence. *American Mythology* was probably conceived expressly for the World’s Columbian Exposition

Fig. 5
Echo, 1891
Plaster
Whereabouts unknown
Photograph: “Decorative Work of the Woman’s Building,” 372; Courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago



of 1893, where it was the central attraction of the Italian section. Where Apolloni created the sculpture and its arrival date in Chicago are uncertain.⁶³ In any event, Potter seems to have known it, at least from photographs. Although her ultimate debt to the French has often been noted, the naturalism and vivacity of contemporary Italian sculpture appealed greatly to the young artist and had a pronounced influence on her approach to her work.

The critic for the *Evening Post* proclaimed Bessie Potter’s *Echo* “as subtly charming in conceit as it is excellent in execution.” The writer provided an ecstatic compendium of its commendable qualities: “The pose is most graceful. The right hand is held to the ear, and as she leans forward with half averted face the line from the shoulder downward along the side and limb is exceedingly good. The flesh is flexible and tender and has about it a seductive vitality that is in itself alluring. Indeed the whole figure is beautifully modeled and the face is an achievement. Not only is it a lovely face, but it is touched with an anxious, searching, pathetic look which shows that the young artist is able to understand and portray the subtle, viewless, actuating impulses, which is the essence of true art—an ability as rare, by the way, in the Art Institute as elsewhere.”⁶⁴ Potter’s *Echo*, with its combined emphasis on the female figure and sentimental mythological theme, perfectly suited the taste of the Chicago critics.⁶⁵ Potter, undoubtedly, found such reviews encouraging. Saint-Gaudens was said to have bestowed compliments on her *Cupid*, now lost, shown in the same exhibition, although she does not appear to have met the celebrated sculptor until a few months later.

Having saved sufficient money, Potter took a leave of absence from the Art Institute in June 1891 and traveled to New York for the first time. The visit left her awestruck. As she later recalled, “I spent the whole Summer drinking in beauty and meeting the famous artists of the day. I had been given letters of introduction to Mr. Augustus St. Gaudens, Mr. Daniel Chester French, Mr. J. Q. A. Ward, Mr. Olin Warner and others, and I made the round of their studios with my heart in my mouth.”⁶⁶ Returning to Chicago and entering the Life Class, Potter completed the program in the autumn.⁶⁷ After three years of study, her formal education concluded; but, with Taft’s encouragement, she continued on in his studio. In reply to a query in 1922 by Robert Harshe, then director of the Art Institute, the



Fig. 6
Adolfo Apolloni
American Mythology, before 1893
Marble
Whereabouts unknown
Photograph: Charles M. Kurtz, ed.,
*Official Illustrations from the Art Gallery
of the World’s Columbian Exposition*
(Philadelphia, 1893), 226