

Patricia Cronin is a conceptual artist, and this book documents a very unique work of hers—the catalogue raisonné of the first professional American sculptor: Harriet Hosmer (1830-1908). Hosmer moved to Rome in 1852 and lived among a community of British-American artists and writers and a circle of learned and well-to-do “independent women.” She had an important career, was praised by critics, and earned impressive sums for her commissions. Patricia Cronin has bridged the historical gap in the study of women artists, and this unique catalogue raisonné contains texts and images made by hand: each of Hosmer’s neo-classical sculptures is reproduced in monochrome watercolor drawings, and thanks to the transparency of this medium, they perfectly portray the brightness of the marble and the play of light on the surface of the works.

Texts by Maura Reilly, Patricia Cronin, William H. Gerdtz

104 pages

37 illustrations, including 36 in color



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HARRIET HOSMER • LOST AND FOUND
A CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ



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CHARTA

Preface

Maura Reilly

Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found, A Catalogue Raisonné by Patricia Cronin is an interventionist project that calls special attention to work by women as cultural producers—Cronin's as well as that of Harriet Hosmer. This conceptually complex catalogue raisonné and related exhibitions challenge the broader framework of art history and its exhibition practices for being unconditionally masculinist. In other words, it takes as its operative assumption that the art system—its institutions, his-stories, and so forth—is a hegemonic discourse that privileges “white male creativity to the exclusion of all women artists.”¹ As a counter-hegemonic project, then, Cronin's Hosmer catalogue raisonné and related exhibitions expand the canons of art history to include what it had hitherto refused—women, and lesbians, in particular. It can be understood, then, as a corrective to the omission of women and feminists from the art-historical records, past and present.

Cronin came to the subject of Hosmer somewhat fortuitously. While researching her marble mortuary sculpture *Memorial To A Marriage* (2002) for art historical precedents she stumbled upon a sepulcher by Hosmer called the *Tomb of Judith Falconnet* (1857–1858) that stunned her; the quality of execution was superb, the neo-classical style on a par with Antonio Canova, she believed. Who was this artist, she wondered? And, as someone who had studied the history of sculpture extensively, why had she never heard of her? It was at that moment that she decided Hosmer was to be her next project.

In 2003, Cronin began researching the biography and oeuvre of Hosmer. The more she learned about the artist, her work, and of her international fame during her lifetime, the more astonished Cronin was by the dearth of scholarly material. Why had this artist been obscured by art history? By extension, if not remembered for her artwork then why not for her notorious reputation and delicious biography? As the leader of the White Marmorean Flock in Rome—as it was so dubbed by Henry James—who surrounded herself with a circle of emancipated women, included among them actress Charlotte Cushman and sculptor Edmonia Lewis, but also by such esteemed literary figures as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the American-born Hosmer was a notorious lesbian with aristocratic lovers, as well as a self-supporting artist with international clients and highly regarded sculptural commissions. Her biography was the stuff of great nineteenth-century novels. Yet there has been nothing substantive written about Hosmer, her life or work—that is, until now.

In *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found* Cronin plays biographer, art historian, and artist, in an effort to offer the first comprehensive catalogue raisonné dedicated exclusively to an extraordinary nineteenth-century woman artist, Harriet Hosmer. As biographer and art historian, Cronin fastidiously researched every work produced by Hosmer, from her first original sculpture of 1852 to her last in 1893. This thorough study offers locations of works, provenance, and exhibitions histories and detailed, formal analyses written in a fresh, contemporary style. The sheer breadth of information contained herein is extraordinary and represents a truly heroic feat, especially

considering that Cronin was starting from scratch. Also included is an extraordinary essay by art historian, William H. Gerdts, who is a leading expert on the White Marmorean Flock. In sum, the catalogue will certainly remain for years to come the definitive scholarly text on Hosmer.

Art historian is only one role that Cronin plays in this multi-layered counter-hegemonic project—the most complex being that of artist. How should she re-produce Hosmer's sculptural work in the catalogue, most of which is not locatable, no longer extant, only known via descriptions or via old photographs? How to reclaim and insert into the canon the life's work of a nearly forgotten artist? While it would have been fairly simple for Cronin to reproduce the surviving works by Hosmer in digital format, she opted instead to present artistic interpretations of the sculptures in small, unique monochrome watercolors—Cronin's preferred medium and because she believed it best represented the luminosity of marble. Each of Hosmer's catalogue entries, then, is accompanied by a reproduction of a watercolor, by Cronin, that depicts a sculpture, by Hosmer. (In the cases where the work no longer exists, as in Hosmer's famous *Queen of Naples* [1868], Cronin has produced a ghost image.)

Issues surrounding postmodern appropriation, and critiques of authorship and aura, are therefore central to Cronin's Hosmer project. These ideas are not new to Cronin, though. Her most famous work to-date, *Memorial To A Marriage*, discussed above, pays direct homage to nineteenth-century realist painter, Gustave Courbet, by appropriating his infamous 1866 lesbian painting, *The Sleepers*, as its formal source. This usurption of a male modern master's language as her own is a tactical mime that functions effectively to deconstruct modernist myths of originality and authorship.

On the contrary, in choosing a female artist, one who was famous in her day yet relatively unknown today, Cronin's deconstructivist project diverges from her previous interventionist project, *Memorial To A Marriage*. With the Hosmer project she is highlighting instead the canon of art history's exclusions and inclusions, thereby figuring forth its discriminatory practices and sexist foundations that make it acceptable for certain artists—male—to be raised to the canon's heights and others not.

It is during her final role, that of curator, that Cronin's project completes itself. Scholarly catalogue raisonné and correlating watercolors in hand, Cronin-as-curator can now present her and Hosmer's work for exhibitions. The first public unveiling of the project took place at The American Academy in Rome, in 2007, where Cronin had been a fellow working on the Hosmer project. It was a most apt and historically ironic location, considering Hosmer's lifelong relationship to Rome but also the fact that throughout the nineteenth century in Rome women artists were prohibited from taking courses at the art academies. The exhibition was suggestively titled *An American in Rome*, leaving viewers to wonder whom the American was, Cronin or Hosmer? Forty of a total of sixty-two watercolors were exhibited, hung simply with pins to the wall, and no explanatory wall

texts. Thusly placed, outside the context of the catalogue raisonné, the objects now become a museological intervention in the lineage of other "minority" artists such as Fred Wilson, Kara Walker, or Zoe Leonard who have all produced "interventions" that are meant to challenge the race and/or sex biases of institutions.

In 2009, the project will have its U.S. debut at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, where it will be featured in The Herstory Gallery, an exhibition space that is meant to work in conceptual tandem with Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974–1979), a monumental feminist installation that commemorates 1,038 female figures. In proximity to an iconic work famous for its strategies of reclamation (historical, women's work, vaginal iconology), Cronin's project will shine and glory in the feminist context that is its conceptual lineage. Thusly located, it will also remind us what art historian Linda Nochlin proclaimed decades ago, when she insisted that the feminist project of the 1970s needed to start with the unburying and resurrection of women from history before analysis and deconstruction of the canon could commence.² Cronin's *Harriet Hosmer: Lost and Found, A Catalogue Raisonné* has proven that Nochlin's rallying cry has in part been answered. It also functions as a reminder that there are many more women artists to be discovered, unearthed, and displayed on museum walls and pedestals.

1. Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art Histories*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 10.

2. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988, pp. 145–178.