SHROUDED IN OBSCURITY: THE
LIFE AND WORKS OF CAROLINE L. RANSOM (1826-1910)

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Imagine the courage it must have taken a young woman from a small village in the Western Reserve to write Asher B. Durand, then President of the National Academy of Design, asking whether the prestigious institution would be "opened to ladies this winter." The young woman was Caroline Louise Ransom; it was 1853 and she was twenty-seven years old, a graduate of the Grand River Institute where she had grown to love art and the classics. After graduation Ransom remained at the Institute as Principal of the Female Department, teacher of drawing and painting, leaving the position after the conclusion of a tragic love affair with Lewis B. Austin, son of Austinburg's founding family.

Ransom was born in Newark, Ohio to Elizabeth (Betsy) and John Ransom. Betsy and John had married in Vermont and set out on their wedding journey with an ox team which no doubt traveled westward on the Great National Pike. They arrived in Newark at least in time for Caroline's birth the autumn of 1826. While Caroline was still very young the couple left the Newark area and relocated in northern Ohio in Kirtland, reportedly on top of the lovely slope where the Mormons later erected their temple. Like many of his Yankee brothers John was interested in purchasing land in the Western Reserve and looked a bit to the east of Kirtland to Harpersfield where he bought a picturesque parcel bordering the Grand River. There John operated a mill and employed thirty to forty men who lived in tenement houses in John's settlement called Ransomville. Although John Ransom was considered "one of the solid men of the county" he lost his little empire in a lottery scam in 1863. Reared with little regard for her financial welfare, the aspiring artist daughter was flung into the position of responsibility for the well-being of her aging and financially destitute parents.

Fortunately in the 50's she had taken the opportunity to study in New York with Durand, Thomas Hicks and Daniel Huntington, all highly respected American artists. Her letter to Durand did not result in admission to the academy. Instead, he took the talented novice as a student on a private basis that winter of 1853. It was difficult for women to gain admission to the nation's few art institutions where Victorian ideas of morality made drawing from life unthinkable for women and yet difficult enough for male students. I would imagine that any disappointment Ransom may have felt in not studying at the academy was readily assuaged by her opportunity to work with the great master privately. Being taught by the president of the academy probably did assure Ransom's automatic inclusion in the institution's annual art exhibition, and she had a picture ready for the National Academy of Design Annual Exhibition in New York as early as 1854. She called the picture she exhibited Sketch among the Apostle Islands, Lake Superior. At the time Ransom studied with Durand, he was regarded America's foremost landscape artist, and it is likely that she executed this work under his tutelage. Still, "after many months of studious and quite successful work, he assured her that her talent and genius, which were decided, were better fitted for portraiture." It is possible there were other considerations. It is my opinion that after her unfortunate love affair she was totally determined to remain single and Durand may in fact have steered the student to portraiture because of her disclosure that she needed to support herself. Whatever the reasons, Durand's advice was taken into consideration, and after first suggesting the portraitist Henry Peters Gray, who was too busy filling back orders, Ransom was placed in the care of portrait painter Thomas Hicks.

Under the tutelage of the "Brusque and Conceited" Hicks, Ransom learned to draw from the plaster cast as well as from Michael Angelo's Skinned Man.
After many weeks of copying, the master allowed the student the privilege of drawing a head from life. This was the portrait of Mrs. Goss of New York which is currently in the collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art where it is known as Woman in Fur.

By 1859 an article in the Boston Daily Evening Transcript reported that Ransom, who was at that time a resident of Sandusky, Ohio, was living temporarily in Washington, D.C. where she was at work on a portrait of Joshua Giddings, congressman from Jefferson, Ohio. The portrait, according to the anonymous author, "bids fair to be a strong and characteristic likeness and an admirable work of art. Miss Ransom's portraits are remarkable for a degree of strength and vigor not often seen in the productions of female artists." By this time the artist was studying with Daniel Huntington and the portrait was hung beside one of Huntington's own pictures in the National Academy of Design 1859 exhibition. Although listed "for sale" in the N.A.D. catalog the portrait was not purchased until 1867 and then by the federal government for the princely sum of one thousand dollars. It was and is included in a gallery of the representatives at the U.S. Capitol and marks the first painting by a woman to have been purchased by the federal government.

While living in Sandusky Ransom's activities were not a matter of concern to the weekly tabloid, the Sandusky Register. However, as soon as she decided to leave, the newspaper suddenly regretted her departure and took a great interest in her new residency in Cleveland. By 1861 she was securely installed in the former studio of Allen Smith, Jr. at 236 Superior. Cleveland was a good choice for Ransom as only two artists were listed in the City Directory at that time. And, though the 1860 Census reported the city's population as fewer than 50,000, Cleveland was then emerging as an industrial and cultural center. Transportation was readily available on railroads running east to New York and Boston, west as far as Chicago, and south to Cincinnati and the deep south. Most importantly, Ohio was beginning to take control of the nation's politics and Ransom's soon-to-be-friend, James A. Garfield, was pursuing a political career as a state senator representing Ohio's Summit and Portage Counties. Ransom's father had dabbled in local politics, and despite her sexual handicap, Ransom the artist had a flair for politics herself.

Ransom's portraits of Giddings and Benjamin Wade graced the walls of her new studio where she held her first Cleveland reception on January 24. Throughout the early sixties she was busy entering pictures in state and county fairs where she often won cash and medals for her "productions" as they were called. Planned advantageously for early fall, the art exhibits at these fairs introduced the public to political candidates in a manner which may have been as effective as the prime-time onslaughts we receive today. In 1862 the state fair was held in Cleveland where the Cleveland Leader singled out Ransom's portrait of gubernatorial candidate John Brough commenting:

"Foremost among her paintings is an admirable portrait, life size (which is saying a good deal) of Hon. John Brough, our candidate for Governor. The presence of so excellent a likeness of the next Governor elect, will afford great pleasure to the people of the state. They can rely upon it as correct in every particular."

Brough did win the election and I feel quite safe in saying that Ransom
undoubtedly aided his campaign by making his likeness familiar to people at the fair.

The war was in full swing and while I do not know a lot about Ransom's activities concerning the war effort I am aware that she was instrumental in the design and execution of a banner which the "Perry Light Infantry" used to take into battle in July of 1861.8 (If anyone knows more about this unit I would appreciate hearing from him/her.) Albert G. Riddle, Cleveland attorney and free-lance historian, wrote for William Brothers History of Ashtabula County that Ransom had worked extensively in the effort of helping wounded soldiers in Washington, D.C. He said that she interrupted her work on a portrait of Salmon P. Chase to help in make-shift Army hospitals. Another Ohio native worthy of additional research, Mary Ann or "Mother" Bickerdike, as she came to be known by grateful wounded soldiers, enticed many women to aid in this service. Although I am aware that Ransom knew Bickerdyke I do not know whether, in fact, Ransom was a formal member of Bickerdyke's war effort forces.

Prior to James A.'s removal from the services of the Army of the Cumberland, Ransom wrote the young general urging him to sit "to her" so that she could enter his portrait in the spring exhibition of the N.A.D.9 This may or may not be the military portrait which is so well known to visitors at Lawnfield, the home of the Garfields in Mentor, Ohio. By this time Ransom's career was moving forward in a calculated, almost predictable pattern. She understood what she needed to do in order to succeed. She knew it was imperative that she be introduced to the real world of art in the revered Capitals of Europe. She must experience The Grand Tour.

The opportunity to avail herself of a major art experience in Europe presented itself with the Exposition Internationale in 1867. Many Americans streamed into Paris for this celebrated early "World's Fair" in which, among a myriad, pictures by both Durand and Huntinton were exhibited. Extant documents reveal that a number of Clevelanders traveling in Europe rendezvoused in Paris to partake the great event. Ransom was one of them and since Victorian propriety would demand that a single woman travel with one or more companions, a Mr. and Mrs. Stevens accompanied the artist on the first leg of her trip. It was a common practice for artists to set up their easels in the art galleries and museums where they copied works of the Old Masters. The picture called Art Students and Copyists in the Louvre which Winslow Homer painted while he was in Paris for the International Exposition shows what a common sight these young aspirants portrayed.

Ransom was another who fine-tuned her technique by copying the Old Masters. At the Louvre she copied at least two of Raphael's works: "one, his Self-Portrait and the other, an oil on canvas after Raphael's Adoration of the Saints. After the Garfields returned to America, Ransom set up housekeeping for at least six months on Pincian Hill in Rome. During her stay there she copied Murillo's Florentine Madonna as well as The Last Hours of Beatrice Cenci by Giulio Romano. Her copy of Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert after Federigo Barocci is in the collection of Lawnfield. You may recall the Old Testament story of Abraham; Sarah, Abraham's wife; Hagar, Sarah's maidservant; and Ishmael. Ishmael, who was the son of Hagar and Abraham, whom God foretold would be "as a wild ass among men" 10 Although Ransom had no children it is possible she identified with Hagar in the regard that her only brother, Albert, had been a wild sort whom she lamented at his death fearing
he would not join their parents in the hereafter.\textsuperscript{11}

Ransom painted this and other works at the Royal Gallery at Dresden. Admittance to the gallery to copy works of art was very difficult to obtain with permission to do so having to be approved by the painter to King John of Saxony. Ransom was privileged to receive this sanction and the report of it was chronicled in the\textit{Daily Evening Transcript} (Boston).

"While Miss Ransom was engaged upon this her marvelous reproduction of it attracted so much attention, that the master of the gallery gave her all the privileges she desired. 'I wish the American lady to have all she wishes,' he said, 'for I shall be glad to see such fine copies sent to America.' Miss Ransom asked permission to copy the\textit{Sistine Madonna}, by Raphael, in the same gallery, and it was at once given to her—a very unusual favor, since royal leave has to be obtained, and artists sometimes have to wait years for their turn."\textsuperscript{12}

In addition to the\textit{Hagar and Ishmael}, the\textit{Sistine Madonna}, and Correggio's\textit{Della Notte or Holy Night}, Ransom copied\textit{St. Roderick} after Murillo. This was her favorite among her own copies of the Old Masters. Writing to her friend, Lucretia, in later years, she said, "\textit{St. Roderick} is really the finest and rarest of all of my copies as well as one of the most expensive. I have always rated that and the\textit{Sistine Madonna} at $1,000.00 each."\textsuperscript{13} At this time Ransom's financial situation was deteriorating and she was asking Lucretia for a $500.00 advance against the\textit{St. Roderick}. She had hoped she could pay the money back at which time she said Lucretia could either return the picture or purchase it. Ransom was never able to pay the money back and the painting remains at Lawnfield as collateral on an unpaid loan.

Ransom's accomplishments in Europe were many. In addition to the visual accomplishments jammed into her portfolio, her self-esteem was at a high point knowing that she had again proved herself a pioneer, being among the first women artists from America to travel to Europe.

The artist was apprehensive about the return voyage on what she called "the great and formidable sea,"\textsuperscript{14} but she returned to Cleveland a heroine, and she received a heroine's welcome. After her arrival she quickly readied her studio, now at fourteen Northrop and Harrington's Block, for a New Year's reception planned to debut her European treasures. Mary Bigelow Janes Ingham was one Cleveland\textendash' present to comment on the successes which Ransom's Grand Tour afforded her.\textsuperscript{15} The\textit{Cleveland Leader} was also complimentary of the results of the artist's eighteen month stay.

Naturally Ransom was anxious to obtain new commissions. Shortly after her return from Europe (even prior to her New Year's reception) Ransom had written a letter to the then Governor of Ohio, Rutherford B. Hayes. Always with her ear tipped to the political grapevine she had heard that an appropriation had been made by the State to commission portraits of Ohio governors. To Hayes she wrote, "If this be so and the Governors are to be painted I would like extremely to have the painting of Gov's. Brough, Chase and the present honorable incumbent."\textsuperscript{16} As it turned out a copy of her Brough, dated 1868, was painted by Allen Smith, Jr., the artist whose studio Ransom had moved into in the early 1860's. Chase's portrait had already been
taken and the "honorable incumbent" chose Charles T. Webber to paint his official likeness. Undaunted, Ransom pushed forward until she secured the portraits of Jacob Dolson Cox and the posthumous portrait of Samuel Huntington, Ohio's third governor. The letters between Ransom and Hayes are an amusing catalog of flattery fallen upon deaf ears. The pay she received from the federal government for the Giddings was in no way to be equaled from Hayes and the State of Ohio. After a great amount of haggling she received two hundred fifty dollars for the Cox (because of the hands and other accoutrements) and one hundred for the Huntington. In a moment of quiet resolve she said to Hayes, "We must work for fame sometimes." 17

During the time of her heavy correspondence with Hayes, Ransom began to formulate her idea of executing a large history painting of General George H. Thomas, hero of the Battle of Chickamauga. In fact, shortly after presentation of the portraits to the State the Leader announced a resolution had passed in the State House to contract with Ransom for a portrait of the revered Civil War general. 18 In spite of the fact that public financial support was never forthcoming Ransom went forward with her plans painting the Rock of Chickamauga (as Thomas came to be nicknamed) and his horse into a topographically correct scene of the battle. She intended that the nine foot by seven foot portrait be purchased to hang over "the north door of the Rotunda." 19 in the Capitol in Washington. Unfortunately she devoted the last thirty-nine years of her life to seeing it placed there. Driven by the same single-mindedness that was necessary for her to become an artist, she could not let the Thomas picture go. Yes, it was important for her to execute a history painting in order to join ranks with contemporary male artists since history painting was considered the most respected of the artistic genres. However, she was very capable and when this particular work did not gain the public recognition she had hoped for, she could have tried something with a different theme.

I feel that I have not been entirely fair to Ransom in considering the Thomas picture. The truth is that she was given a great deal of encouragement in the early life of the picture. It was carried from one Army of the Cumberland reunion to another where old soldiers hailed their revered late chief. A chromolithograph was even made of the picture and sold to those who wished to gaze upon Thomas in the comfort of their homes. 20 The press was intermittently supportive and negative in their reaction to the picture depending who, it seems, they were trying to please. Often unkind remarks were made in the press by persons who had not even seen the portrait. Of course, the Garfields were involved; it was he who submitted a bill to Congress to purchase the Thomas, formally called General George H. Thomas After the Battle of Chickamauga, as well as Carpenter's First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. Carpenter asked twenty-five thousand for his whereas Ransom's was priced at ten thousand. After both pictures were attacked by a New York Times newcomer they were stricken from the bill on a point of order. 21 Ransom's Thomas picture was presented to Congress on three subsequent occasions, but it was never purchased and the artist stipulated in her will that the picture be left to the Capitol. Even after her death it created a good deal of controversy. And... though it was noted in the 1965 inventory that it was located in a storeroom in the office of the Architect of the Capitol, it is not currently anywhere to be found. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact problem with what Ransom had hoped would be her masterpiece. She expressed her own sentiment in this way:
"Had this painting been made by a man artist he would easily have gotten $25,000 for it and no questions raised against it. Alas! How hard it is to have to continue against the disabilities of womanhood."22

After the picture's initial downfall, Ransom did suffer a mild depression but portrait commissions, the activities of the Washington Literary Society, and the organization of her own Classical Society kept her busy in Washington which came to be her winter home from 1875 until her death in 1910. Growing dissatisfaction with what she considered Cleveland's lack of artistic or cultural stimulation is reflected in this excerpt from a letter to her "Dear Lucretia or Crete." She said, "It is awfully stifled here (Cleveland) for me no congenial society, no anything for an artist to feast upon or even enjoy as in other cities."23 So the move to Washington opened new doors for the artist by providing the opportunity to paint the effigies of even more political bigwigs. Between 1875 and Garfield's death in 1881 Ransom sold this portrait of Jefferson and three others of which I am aware to the federal government. Although her inscription on the lower left clearly states C. L. Ransom after Willson Peale, the portrait she copied was by Rembrandt Peale, now in the collections of the New York Historical Society. For some reason Ransom thought it was by Rembrandt's father, Charles Wilson Peale. The Jefferson portrait by Ransom can be found in the Treaty Room of the State Department. She also sold a full-length portrait of James A. Dix to the U.S. Treasury as well as one of Alexander Hamilton which she copied from the Trumball portrait. Ransom's copy of the first Secretary of the Treasury hangs in Treasury Secretary Brady's private office in the Treasury building. And she also was commissioned to copy a portrait of John W. Taylor, an early nineteenth century Speaker of the House. There may be more official portraits which she executed in this period of time but even these four within a period of five years is quite impressive. Unfortunately after Garfield's era of influence was over the orders were not forthcoming.

Not long after her move to Washington Ransom received a ten thousand dollar commission from a Dr. Nicholls of Florida to paint all of the presidents and their wives. It was to be a ten year project and Ransom embarked upon it by painting the portrait of U.S. Grant whose term of office had then just expired. As newspapers were lauding Nicholls as a gentleman philanthropist who was going to leave the collection to a public institution,24 Ransom was expounding to Lucretia on her suspicion that he was a fraud. Finally she received word of the doctor's sudden death and the realization that the monumental commission would not materialize set her emotions into another tailspin. She finished the Grant toward the end of the century and exhibited it at the Waldorf-Astoria at a joint meeting of the Ohio Society of New York and the Daughters of Ohio.25 This is another of Ransom's portraits which cannot now be located.

Two things stand out in my mind from an historical perspective as to the irony of Ransom's life in Washington. I offer them so that you might remember her the next time you are in the Federal City. Her first residence in the city was at 450 Pennsylvania Avenue, the exact location of the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art. Her second studio/residence, reportedly erected for her by a generous friend, Mrs. Fitzugh Coyle, was situated at 915 F Street, just two or three doors west of what is now the Museum of American Art and the National Portrait Gallery. What strikes me as being sad and ironical is the fact that neither of these prestigious institutions hold
any of her works of art.

The disappointments the aging Ransom had received naturally affected her outlook on life. Art was definitely a profession for males. Women were excluded from the life class in the nation's few academies. The membership in artist's social clubs such as the New York based "Sketch Club" and the "Society of Washington Artists" was restricted to men. The nineteenth century theologian, Nathaniel Edmonds, admonished women to "...make no display of your talents or attainments; for everyone will clearly see, admire and acknowledge them so long as you cover them with the beautiful veil of modesty."26 Ransom was a religious person who would have had to reconcile this prevailing sentiment in pressing forward in what many considered then as today, a self-centered, self-serving profession. While it was considered a definite advantage for nineteenth century women to learn the socially acceptable pastime of drawing flowers and miniatures, pursuing art as a profession was totally outside the mainstream of what was considered acceptable. Ransom's frustration in pursuing a male-dominated profession is evident in this excerpt from a letter she wrote to Crete who had known of a young girl in northern Ohio who wanted to become an artist. She said:

"I have no heart to encourage any woman to be a professional anything unless she is sick and destitute of sensibility. There is such a mean contemptible spirit shown towards a woman that supports herself in any way save by prostitution that I sometimes think that to be a first class harlot is preferable to a poor unmarried woman than any of the professions that are open to her.

If Miss W--- has not the courage and the enthusiasm of the early Christian martyrs backed by good health and sublime faith in herself as the possessor of the God given gifts requisite for a first class artist, I would advise her to marry or go into a nunnery, rather than attempt this most arduous and fearfully unremunerating profession, save to the fortunate few."27

So, you might ask, as certainly I have in the two years I have contemplated the life and works of Caroline Ransom, why is she totally unknown now if she was so well regarded in her own time? Of course, there is no simple answer. It seems to me, however, that often her personality got in her way and kept her from progressing to really great works of art. She allowed defeat to drag her into depressions which manifested themselves most frequently through physical symptoms. Perhaps her vision was not broad enough to allow her the flexibility she needed as an artist, or perhaps she was too much a product of Victorian moral rigidity. I also believe there was another important consideration. When we look at those who are now considered the triumvirate of nineteenth century American artists: Thomas Eakins, Winslow Homer, and Mary Cassatt, we find that their personal financial status gave them a freedom which Ransom was not afforded after her father's financial collapse. Had Ransom been free to explore as were the three aforementioned artists she may have found a looser brushstroke, more vibrant colors, or the controversial impressionistic mode more to her liking. As it was she was tied to the conservative and realistic formula of portraiture which her clientele favored.

We must not forget the limitations which the nineteenth century placed
on women, and which admittedly women accepted for themselves. Ransom was a pioneer in breaking out of this framework. She was among the first women artists to study with the great American artists in New York, and among the first to cross the Atlantic for the essential Grand Tour. She exhibited regularly with the most prestigious art institute in American, the National Academy of Design. Unlike many women who stuck to flower painting and miniatures, her works of art fell into all of the major genres of artistic expression. Ransom rubbed elbows with the political giants of her time, many of whom sat to her in a professional setting. Contemporary literature was consistent in its assessment that Ransom was accomplished, cultured, and gracious. She was uncompromising in her devotion to her profession and to those she loved. The one word she would have chosen to describe herself in a complimentary manner is "noble." Through her own words it is evident she was aware that her contribution lay primarily in making the professional woman's way a bit easier. In an open letter to the Cleveland Leader in 1876 she said, "I have trod the thorny road, endured the 'agony and bloody sweat' and know what vitality, courage, and sublime faith in oneself is required for success in this profession for a woman."28 And to her "Dear Lucretia" the artist wrote in an undated letter, "I trust the day is not far distant when the many obstacles in the way of woman's progress to the acme of highest art will be swept away."29
NOTES


5. Boston Transcript, March 7, 1859, courtesy of Merl M. Moore, Jr.

6. The Cleveland Leader, January 24, 1861.

7. Ibid., September 16, 1863.

8. Ibid., July 25, 1861.


11. C. L. R. to Lucretia Garfield, September 15, 1867, Papers of Lucretia Garfield, Box 60, Library of Congress.

12. Daily Evening Transcript (Boston), May 6, 1873.

13. C. L. R. to L. G., Studio 8 P.M. Thursday (n.d.)

14. C. L. R. to L. G., December 9, 1867.

15. Mary Bigelow Janes Ingham, Women of Cleveland and Their Work (Cleveland: W. A. Ingham, 1893), 208.


17. Ibid., April 11, (1870?).


20. Ohio State Journal, Columbus, Ohio, September 14, 1874.

22. C. L. R. to L. G., February 3, 1885.
23. C. L. R. to L. G., November 23, 1871.
24. Daily Evening Transcript (Boston), April 19, 1879.
27. C. L. R. to L. G., February 25, (no year given).
28. C. L. R. open letter to the Cleveland Leader, January 29, 1876.