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Harriet Whitney Frishmuth
Lyric Sculptor

by Beatrice Gilman Proske

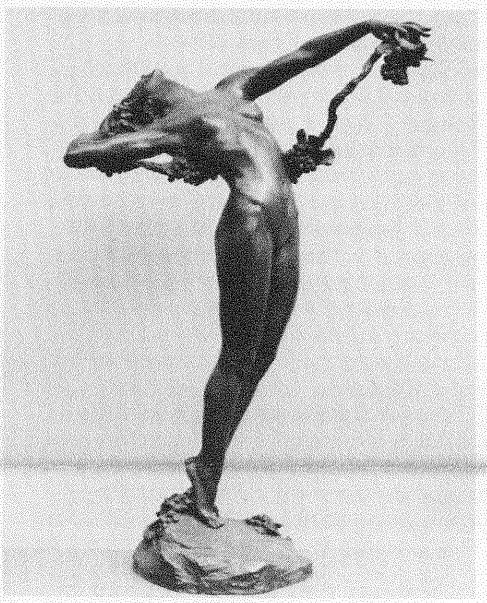
The early years of the twentieth century witnessed a tremendous surge of interest in sculpture, especially in America. A yeast was working to expand and enrich the art through the increasing number who made it their profession. The modernist iconoclasts whose work dominated the notorious Armory Show of 1913 were venturing on new ways of embodying their view of life. At the same time, transformations of style were occurring among more traditional sculptors as well.

Historical Background

Each historical period places a different emphasis on the basic elements of sculpture. Michelangelo's dictum that a piece of sculpture should be so self-contained that it could be rolled downhill without damage started a preoccupation with mass and volume that strongly influenced later generations of sculptors. In antithesis, interest in line informed the "art deco" style of the 1920s and '30s. Stemming from the earlier Art Nouveau movement (1890-1910), in which irregular lines and whiplash curves were principal elements, art deco's linear emphasis aimed not only at creating decorative effects but also at realizing the expressive essence of form.

The last two decades of the nineteenth century had brought forth sculptors like Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French, who easily held their own with their European contemporaries. Although many earlier nineteenth-century American sculptors had made Italy, and later Paris, their second home, and had found inspiration in Greek and Roman works and in the nineteenth-century neoclassical revival led by Canova and Thorwaldsen, they had remained surprisingly indifferent to the intervening Renaissance and Baroque periods. Saint-Gaudens was the first to look at Renaissance sculpture with admiration, and he adopted aspects of its style to good effect in his work.

The many students of Saint-Gaudens, French, and others diverged in as many directions, from simple naturalism to extreme stylization. One of Saint-Gaudens's pupils, Frederick MacMonnies, for example, broke away from the solemnity of lofty themes into exuberant flights of fancy, as in his boatload of laughing oarswomen for the Columbia Exposition of 1893. Completely uninhibited, it shattered the formality of the classical mold.



1. The Vine

Among the several young women hired by MacMonnies as assistants at the exposition (a bold move at that time) was Janet Scudder, who discovered in the charm of Donatello's and Verrocchio's children inspiration for her own gay creations. Her work was just the thing to adorn the palaces then being built by the new American tycoons. Statues designed expressly as fountain, garden, or pool ornaments came into vogue and remained popular well into the twentieth century. This taste was enthusiastically cultivated by American sculptors, many of whom developed highly individual approaches to the genre.

Harriet Whitney Frishmuth

Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, born in Philadelphia in 1880, devoted herself almost exclusively to this kind of sculpture, eventually arriving at a very personal style. She followed the usual long, hard road of the professional sculptor: years spent in art classes in Paris and New York; anatomy learned by dissecting at a medical school; apprenticeship to established sculptors; and then, in her own studio, the struggle for commissions, progressing from small utilitarian objects such as ash trays and

(continued on page 4)

Beatrice Gilman Proske has been a historian of American sculpture since 1932. A brief biography appears on page five.

EDITORIAL

Lyric Sculptor

This eleventh issue of *Aristos* is the first devoted primarily to one artist. The idea to feature the work of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth was inspired, nearly three years ago, by a reading of Charles N. Aronson's *Sculptured Hyacinths* (reviewed on the opposite page).

Aronson quite rightly applies the term "lyric sculpture" to Frishmuth's work. He defines it thus: "Three-dimensional art that *sings the story* of its love for beauty as it pretends to no other reason for its existence." The dictionary definition of "lyric" that best fits this genre is: "Characterized by ardent, tender, or joyous emotion." Taken together, the two definitions suggest the special qualities of Frishmuth's sculpture that give such pleasure.

Much care has gone into selecting the photographs reprinted here. But even the best photographs can only approximate the effect of Frishmuth's work. As with all art, one must view the works themselves to fully experience the pleasure they afford. For readers who would like to seek out Frishmuth's sculpture, we have included information on the location of several of her important pieces.

We trust that this issue of *Aristos* will contribute substantially not only to the delight of our readers but to the growth of serious interest in the life and art of this important American sculptor.

Scholar and Gentlewoman

A true Yankee, raised on a New Hampshire farm at a time when her fellow New Englanders Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French were at the peak of their powers, art historian Beatrice Gilman Proske brings to her personal life the same rare mix of qualities she brings to her writing—forthrightness, wit, simplicity, warmth, a respect for tradition and scholarship, and just the right touch of elegance. Much like the "yeast working to expand and enrich" American sculpture during the early years of this century, Bea Proske has expanded and enriched both *Aristos* and those of us fortunate enough to have worked with her.

Consulting Editor

Michelle Marder Kamhi, who served as consulting editor for this issue, is a freelance writer, editor, and filmmaker. A graduate of Barnard College, she holds an M.A. in Art History from the City University of New York. She has served as editor on several volumes in Columbia University Press's Records of Civilization series, and has written numerous articles for professional and general publications. Λ

Notes on Harriet Whitney Frishmuth

Works Illustrated

Work	Year	Medium	Size	Model(s)	Credit
1. *The Vine*	1921	Bronze	7'2"	Desha*	M
2. *Extase*	1920	Bronze	20"	Desha	W
3. *Slavonic Dancer*	1921	Bronze	12½"	Leon Barté	M
4. *The Dancers*	1921	Bronze	17"	Desha and L. Barté	CNA
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Source: *Sculptured Hyacinths.*

Credit: Photographs courtesy of: M—Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; W—Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut; P—Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, Oklahoma; CNA—Charles N. Aronson.

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Archival Materials

Private papers, records, letters, and many cast patterns, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13210 (contact: Carolyn Davis, Manuscript Librarian). Photographs, press clippings, and catalogs, National Sculpture Society, 15 East 26th Street, New York, NY 10010 (contact: Theodora Morgan, Executive Editor, *Sculpture Review*).

BOOKS

Sculptured Hyacinths

Reviewed by Louis Torres

As the only published book on the American sculptor Harriet Whitney Frishmuth (1880-1980), *Sculptured Hyacinths* is a work of no small significance. With its numerous photographs of Frishmuth's sculpture, her figure models, and the artist herself, it is an important resource for anyone interested not only in her work but in the history of American sculpture. Moreover, for any lover of classicism and lyricism in figurative sculpture, it provides a rare measure of delight.

Written by Charles N. Aronson, a retired inventor and manufacturer who is the principal collector of Frishmuth's work, *Sculptured Hyacinths* takes its title from this verse by a renowned Persian poet of the Middle Ages:

> If of thy mortal goods thou art
> bereft,
> And from thy slender store
> Two loaves alone to thee are left,
> Sell one, and with the dole
> Buy hyacinths to feed thy soul.

For any lover of classicism and lyricism in figurative sculpture, Sculptured Hyacinths *provides a rare measure of delight.*

There are hyacinths galore in this volume. The sheer profusion of photographs (289 in 219 pages) makes the book both a useful reference work and a sculpture lover's trove. Multiple photographs of single pieces abound, showing works from different perspectives, often in intimate detail. We see them much as we want to see them in person—not only from afar but in details lovingly selected. Both our understanding and our esthetic pleasure are enhanced in the process.

The book's research value is further enhanced by two detailed indexes. An acquisitions index catalogs the twenty-nine works in the Aronson collection. A more complete, chronological index lists forty-one works by Frishmuth, with a small photograph of each, as well as information on the medium, dimensions, model, number of castings in the edition, and location of at least one example of each work. Though even this index does not cover all of Frishmuth's oeuvre, it is both fascinating and highly informative.

If *Sculptured Hyacinths* has any shortcomings, they derive, as do its considerable virtues, from its personal, almost autobiographical character. The book is as much "about" its author as it is about the sculptor herself. Aronson's style, though often engaging and insightful, may prove distracting to some readers; and specialists in the field might ask for greater precision in his presentation. Ultimately, the reader's reaction will be determined by the extent to which he shares Aronson's passion for his subject. For me, as for many readers, the affinity is strong.

In the opening chapter, Aronson recalls his first esthetic experiences as a child. "What is your earliest recollection of art?" he asks. "What was the first thing in your life that was not for eating or wearing or lying in out of the cold and damp? What is the first thing you remember as being for nothing else but to look at and enjoy?" For the eight-year-old Aronson, it was a fine print of Maxfield Parrish's *Daybreak,* purchased by his Uncle Walter at a time "before it became unfashionable to like something because it was beautiful to look at and gave you pleasure."

The author goes on to recount, in his typically anecdotal manner, his first introduction to sculpture:

> My next major influence in art was Miss Jones, who came in [to school] Wednesdays to teach Music Appreciation one week and Art Appreciation the next week.... One Saturday Miss Jones took me to the Museum of Art.... The one thing I remember and will never forget was a great marble sculpture [a copy of the *Victory of Samothrace*].... The beautiful copy I saw as a young boy captivated me, and from then on I was a lover of three-dimensional beauty in art....

Another early memory is of a second favorite uncle's "little bronze statuette [entitled *The Good Fairy*] of a girl in a wind-blown skirt, her arms flung wide to match the infectious spirit of her laughing, happy face." She was, Aronson adds, "the only foolish purchase Uncle Frank ever made." "I think that at the time only three people understood his need [to own the figure]: himself, Uncle Walter, and me."

Although such writing is not the stuff of which art "scholarship" and formal criticism are made, it gives us a rare glimpse into the childhood of a man whose unabashed love of beauty, of sculpture, and of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth's work in particular, inspired him to acquire the largest collection of her sculpture in the world. It also led him to write this tribute to her, for which we are much the richer.

Aronson devotes a full chapter of *Sculptured Hyacinths* to an account of the creation of his estate, *Hundred Acres.* "We had 25 acres of lawn, 75 acres of trees, fish *in* the waters and waterfowl *on* the waters; all that was lacking was statuary *beside* the waters." The other half of the "we" he refers to his wife, Jo Aronson, whom he lovingly portrays. Together, the couple began to acquire sculpture—*Ripples* (1953), *Goose Girl* (1954), *White Reflections* (1955), and *Lorelei* (1957)—to stand beside and in the natural and artificial lakes that now dot the estate.

The remaining ten chapters of the book deal with Harriet Whitney Frishmuth—the woman and the artist—and with the acquisition of her sculpture by the Aronsons. The couple first met Frishmuth in 1958, when they began to purchase her work. She had not created a popular piece since *Day Dreams* in 1939. (Her last work was of her cat, Pou Pou, in 1941.)

Aronson's account of conversations with Frishmuth and with her secretary and companion, Ruth Talcott, as well as letters from the two women, enrich our understanding of the artist. And then there are the photographs, one special gem showing the young sculptor at work in 1912.

The chapter on Frishmuth's favorite model, the dancer Desha, is especially remarkable. Rarely are we privy to this aspect of a sculptor's creativity. Born in Yugoslavia in 1900, Desha came to the United States in 1916, and was a member of the Fokine Ballet. (Later, she and her husband Myrio [Jean Delteil] helped to popularize the adagio style of ballroom dance which he had created earlier.) In a series of often stunning photographs, including poses with her husband and with her sister, we see Desha as she appeared over a period of more than four decades. One wonderful photograph shows the model (in her sixties) and the sculptor (in her eighties) enjoying a moment of intimate conversation, and above them Frishmuth's *Dancers,* silhouetted against the window.

Sculptured Hyacinths fittingly closes with a pictorial overview of the Frishmuth Gallery. Located in the Aronson home, the gallery houses the twenty-nine Frishmuth sculptures in their private collection. Here, displayed in a single spacious room, are all the works the reader has come to know and love in intimate photographic detail. One longs to be in that sun-filled expanse, alone with the sculpture. A

Sculptured Hyacinths

Published by Vantage Press in 1973, Sculptured Hyacinths, *by Charles N. Aronson, may be ordered directly from the author, RR1, Arcade, NY 14009. Cost: $20.00 plus $1.00 postage. Please mention* Aristos.

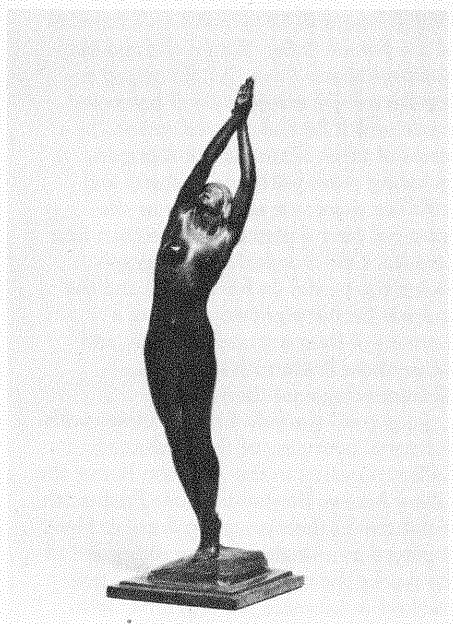
Harriet Whitney Frishmuth

(continued from page 1)

bookends, through bolder ventures into life-size figures supporting sundials, to portraits and memorials, and finally to free-standing figures. It is strange that, although she spent much of her girlhood in Paris, Switzerland, and Dresden, European sculpture seems to have left little impress on her art.

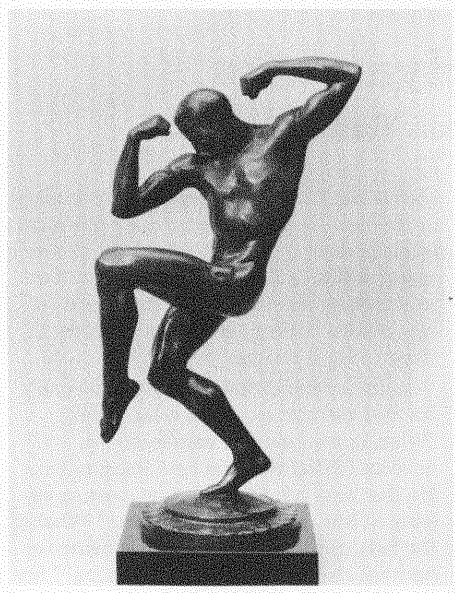
Frishmuth herself credited Rodin (with whom she studied) as having supplied her with certain guiding principles, such as the importance of silhouette. Her electrifying sense of motion and her fluid surfaces may also owe something to his example, but her surfaces are more smoothly modeled, without abrupt transitions or broken planes. From whatever direction the figures are viewed, their outlines are gently curved, yet pulsating with life.

The majority of Frishmuth's work was done in her studio in Sniffen Court, off East Thirty-sixth Street in New York City, where she lived from 1914 to 1937. It is characterized by a jubilant vitality, a gaiety of mood, which she sustained throughout the twenties and thirties, inspired in large measure by her chief model, the dancer Desha. Their association, beginning with *Extase* (fig. 2) in 1920, assumed an unusual importance in Frishmuth's art. When Desha first appeared, a young girl recently arrived from Yugoslavia looking for work as a model, her personality captivated the



2. Extase

sculptor, who later recorded how "she went skipping, half dancing and singing through the courtyard to the street." A kind of collaboration grew up between the two: when Frishmuth turned on the Victrola, Desha would improvise dance steps to the music; when the sculptor glimpsed a pose that she thought would be effective in bronze, the dancer would repeat it so that the artist could recreate it.



3. Slavonic Dancer

Almost all of Frishmuth's figures have the rhythmic qualities of the dance. But unlike her contemporary Malvina Hoffman (much of whose art was devoted to explicit dance subjects), Frishmuth directed her attention specifically to the dance in only two pieces—her male *Slavonic Dancer* (fig. 3) and *The Dancers* (fig. 4). Both these works are clearly linear designs, reduced to a study of angles in the one and to a play of straight and slightly bent lines connecting reverse curves in the other. Even with the symmetrically balanced composition of *The Dancers*, the centrifugal tension of the spin is strongly felt.

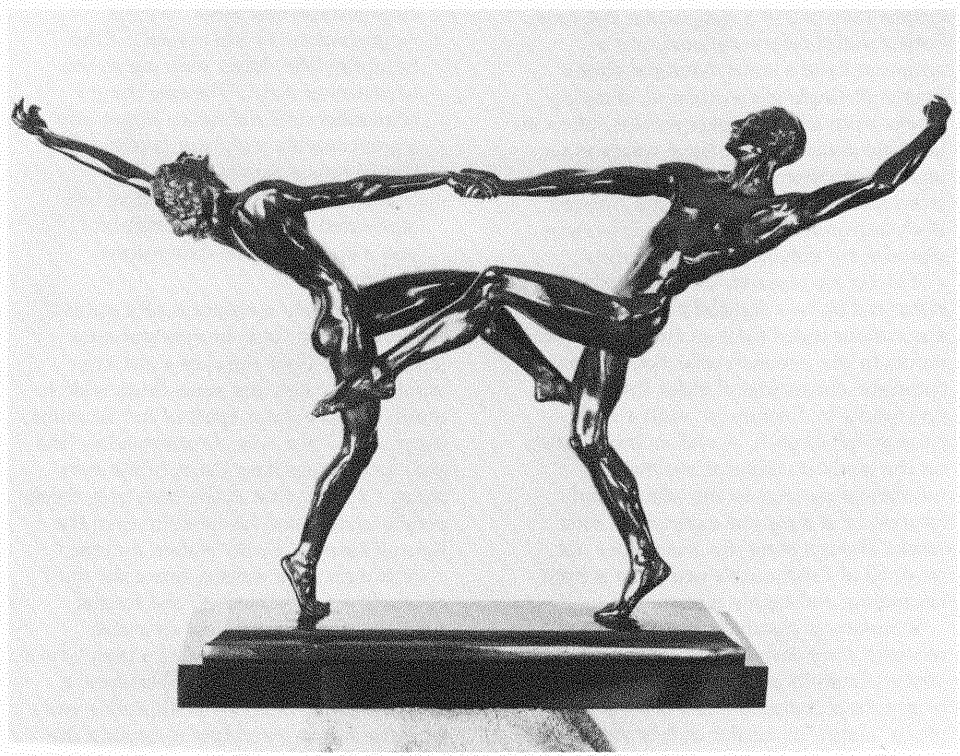
Simplification was carried to the point of stylization in *Speed*, the only Frishmuth work to possess this quality. The straight parallel lines of the wings reinforce the horizontal stretch of the figure.

In *Extase*, as in *Joy of the Waters* (fig. 5), elongation of the figures through their upstretched arms captures a dancer's striving for elevation.

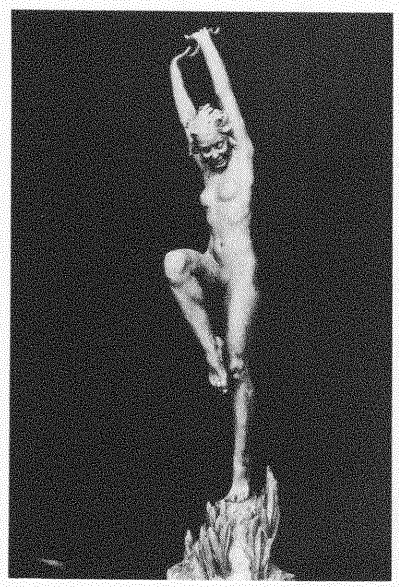
The actual sensation of being airborne is expressed in an unusual group entitled *The Hunt*, of which only a small edition was cast. The work originated in the desire of a young sculptor, Karl Illava, to model animals to accompany one of Frishmuth's figures. The collaboration yielded an open composition in which Diana leaps forward over the backs of two wolfhounds.

In *The Vine* (fig. 1) the figure is sharply arched, with head thrown back and arms raised shoulder high to hold the grapevine that gives the sculpture its title. No detail of the modeling is allowed to interrupt the body's curve, as taut as a drawn bow. Frishmuth never added drapery (as her contemporaries often did) to supplement movement or reinforce stance, much less as a sop to Victorian prudery. The sheer beauty of the human form was her theme.

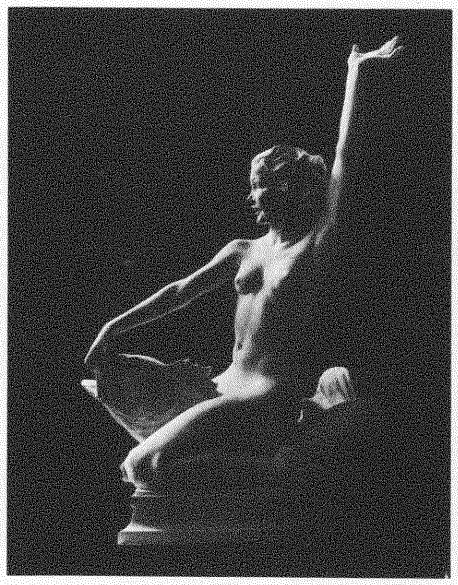
Forward rush of movement, rather than vertical direction, characterizes *Call of the Sea* (fig. 6). Even in this ordinary motive for garden sculpture—a girl riding on a fish—the sculptor used her special gifts to endow the group with a unique vitality. In *Humoresque*, where fish also appear as adjuncts, Frishmuth strengthens the movement by a more complicated play of pattern. The graceful femininity and daintiness of this work and *Playdays*—though unpalatable to a public looking for something stronger and more serious—are



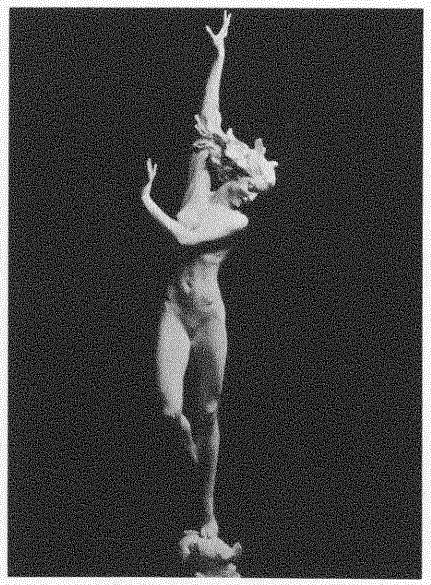
4. The Dancers



5. Joy of the Waters



6. Call of the Sea



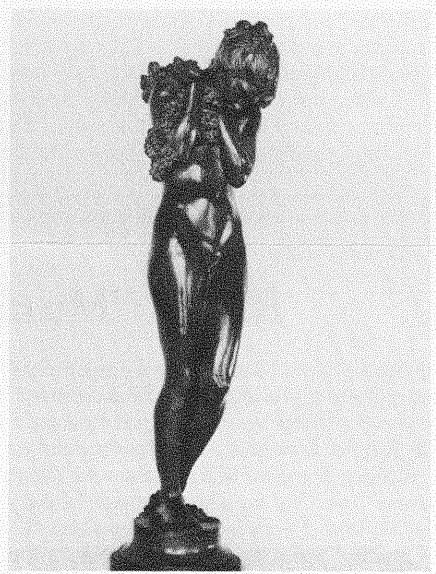
7. Crest of the Wave

in harmony with the youthful freshness that imbued all of Frishmuth's work.

What she did was to use dance poses and movements to express the joy of life, not an easy thing to do in sculpture. In fact, it may well be more difficult for a sculptor to capture pleasant sensations and emotions and make them seem natural than to represent graver feelings. Yet, despite the sense of excitement in Frishmuth's sculpture, there is a serenity of spirit that excludes passion and the more violent emotions. Even as erotic a subject as the embracing couple in *Fantaisie* is treated with a restraint that tempers desire.

Moreover, not all her subjects are shown in lively action. The exuberance of *Joy of the Waters* and *Crest of the Wave* (fig. 7) contrasts with the quieter vein of other creations, composed in contained silhouettes. Beginning with *Sweet Grapes* (fig. 8) in 1922, this change of mood is most apparent toward the end of her artistic activity, in *Reflections* (1930) and *Daydreams* (1939). In each, the head is bent downward, the arms are close to the body, and the spirit is one of thoughtful contemplation.

One of the puzzles of Frishmuth's career is that though she lived nearly one hundred years, dying on January 1, 1980, her professional life had drawn to a close many years earlier. There may be many reasons: an injury sustained in a fall from a scaffolding hampered her physical ability; the death of her mother and then her sister, who had been her lifelong companions, depressed her spirits; the course that contemporary sculpture was taking offended her sensibilities. Or the simple fact may be that her vein of gold had run out. Her body of work, concentrated in so short a period, is fortunately preserved in durable bronze. She was not prolific, yet she succeeded in realizing a prime concern of her generation—creating a series of works that was not only distinctively her own but also, in its freshness and jubilant vitality, distinctly American.



8. Sweet Grapes

About the Author

Beatrice Gilman Proske, Curator of Sculpture Emeritus of The Hispanic Society of America, in New York City, began her career as an art historian in 1920, at the Society.

Since 1932 Mrs. Proske has been associated with the major American sculpture collection at Brookgreen Gardens, South Carolina. Her definitive catalog *Brookgreen Gardens Sculpture,* first published in 1936 and revised by her in 1968, contains commentary on the several hundred pieces of sculpture then in the collection, as well as biographies of the sculptors. (Harriet Whitney Frishmuth was among the many individuals interviewed by Mrs. Proske in her research for the catalog.) She was also a contributing editor for *A Century of American Sculpture—Treasures from Brookgreen Gardens.*

Mrs. Proske is currently a member of the board of advisors at Brookgreen Gardens, and serves as chairman of its publications committee. In addition, she continues her long affiliation with the National Sculpture Society as an associate member and a contributor to its journal, *Sculpture Review.*

The Vine

Two of the five known castings of the 7'2" *Vine* are in major museums: the Metropolitan Museum of Art (American Wing) in New York City, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (possibly in storage). A third casting of *The Vine,* as well as one of *The Hunt (Diana),* is in the Frank H. McClung Museum, located on the University of Tennessee campus in Knoxville.

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