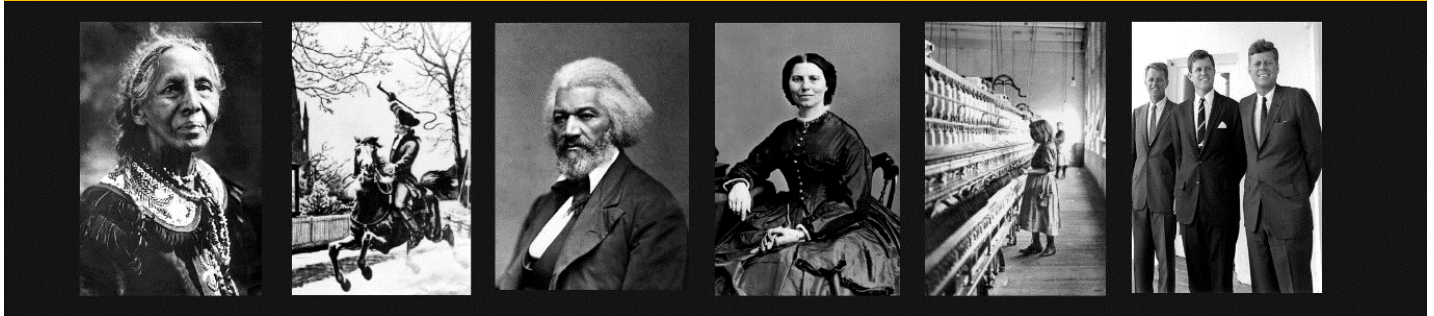


The Historical Journal of Massachusetts



“Sculptor Theodora Alice Ruggles Kitson: ‘A Woman Genius.’”

Author: Christine C. Neal

Source: *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Volume 44, No. 1, Winter 2016, pp. 2-29.

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University



You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work: masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.

Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/number/date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.westfield.ma.edu/historical-journal/>.





Theodora Alice Ruggles Kitson

This photo shows Theo Alice Ruggles Kitson at work on a sculpture, circa 1899. Henry Hudson and Theo Alice Ruggles Kitson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

PHOTO ESSAY

Sculptor Theodora Alice Ruggles Kitson: “A Woman Genius”

CHRISTINE C. NEAL



Abstract: *Theodora Alice Ruggles Kitson (1871–1932) was one of the most prolific and successful American women sculptors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During her lifetime, she earned honors, awards, and commissions as well as public and critical praise. Today, her name is little known in comparison to her contemporaries even though her work, particularly the war memorials for which she was most famous, can be found in nearly every state. As art historical researchers attempt to revive the careers of forgotten women artists, the author argues that it is time to reexamine Kitson’s rich life and legacy. Dr. Christine C. Neal is a professor of art history at the Savannah College of Art and Design.*

* * * * *

This article takes its title from a phrase, “a revolt against nature: a woman genius,” that art critic and writer Octave Mirbeau (1848–1917) used to describe French sculptor Camille Claudel (1864–1943). In the view of their contemporaries, the term was equally applicable to American sculptor

Theodora Alice Ruggles Kitson (1871–1932) in both its positive and negative connotations.¹ From very early in life, the label “genius,” usually applied to a man and intended as a compliment, was used to describe Kitson. This characterization first appeared in print in 1890 in relation to her entries in the Paris Salon when she was a teen. Five years later in 1895, the twenty-four-year-old Kitson’s talent was heralded again when a reporter for *Harper’s Weekly* wrote, “Though one of the youngest women who are known through their work in the art world, Mrs. Kitson has had the most successful career of any woman who has undertaken the profession of sculpture.”² In 1893, at the age of twenty-two, Theo Kitson and her husband, Henry Hudson Kitson (1865–1947), were admitted as inaugural members to the National Sculpture Society, making Theo its first female member.³ A headline in 1902 in *The Boston Globe* praised Kitson as having “great genius,” highlighting the fact that she was the “first of her sex to execute a soldier’s monument.”⁴

Kitson’s famous memorial of the Spanish-American War, the *Hiker* (1906), became the icon of that conflict and was widely reproduced throughout the continental United States. Indeed, the war memorial genre became her specialty. One of forty artists who contributed art to the Vicksburg National Military Park, Kitson completed approximately three times more busts and relief portraits than the other sculptors and, until 2008, was the only woman artist represented in the national park.⁵ Throughout her lifetime, Kitson received honors, awards, commissions, and critical praise, evidence of the complimentary characterization of her “genius.”

Yet in the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a “woman genius” was a complete aberration from the norm, both in Europe and in this country. A female with Kitson’s prodigious talent was considered such a rarity that the label often had negative connotations: to many it represented a “revolt against nature.”⁶ Nature, as it was understood at the time, had reserved genius for men and formed woman to work chiefly in the private, domestic sphere. Ironically, despite receiving numerous awards and commissions and being identified as a genius by her contemporaries, Kitson has not been included in the art historical “canon” of women sculptors. This article seeks to correct this neglect by exploring several of Kitson’s key works.

Members of the commonly cited canon include: Margaret Foley (1820–1877), Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908), Edmonia Lewis (1844–1907), and Vinnie Ream (1847–1914), among others. Although these women were older than Kitson, her contemporaries Anna Hyatt Huntington (1876–1973) and Harriet Frishmuth (1880–1980) are also regularly the subjects of art historical examination. Yet Kitson was equally successful and renowned during her lifetime. In fact, it could be argued that she surpassed these female artists, as

well as many of her male contemporaries, in terms of her popularity with the general public for monumental sculpture.

Prospects for women sculptors had improved by the time Kitson began her career, but success for a woman artist was still elusive. In 1874, for example, Anne Whitney (1821–1915) competed for the Cambridge commission to create a statue of Senator Charles Sumner. Whitney submitted her entry anonymously and garnered the most votes for her proposal. However, when the committee discovered her gender, “after much debate (the judges) decided that it would not be proper for a woman to sculpt the figure—specifically the legs—of a man.”⁷ Supporters of the young artist, however, provided Whitney with funds in 1900 to cast her bronze version of the abolitionist, which today is found in Harvard Square. While Kitson seems not to have encountered overt prejudice because of her gender, she faced other obstacles because of her youth, such as lack of access to professional art training.

Among the least known of American women sculptors, Kitson and her oeuvre are worthy of deeper examination. Representative works from early, middle, and late periods in Kitson’s career, created at a time when women in general began to have more professional opportunities, reveal her contribution to American sculpture.

EARLY LIFE

Kitson was born Theodora Alice Ruggles in 1871 in Brookline, Massachusetts. Her ability was recognized early in her life when she sculpted a recumbent horse out of snow. In 1885, Boston architect Edward Cabot saw the sculpture and encouraged the Ruggleses to nurture their fourteen-year-old’s skill. In future work, horses appear only a handful of times in her oeuvre. There exists one statue of a horse, perhaps recalling her childhood snow sculpture. Other animals commanded the teen’s attention. Young Theo, as she was known, reportedly modeled animals from sand while vacationing at the beach with her family, thus displaying a facility to work with the various materials provided by the natural environment.⁸ Other animals would include an undated work of a cat as well as a hare paired with a youth in *Young Orpheus*.

Although architect Cabot found young Theo’s ability worthy of further training, the Ruggleses had difficulty finding the right avenue through which she might do this. The aspiring sculptor was refused admittance to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts School because of her youth. Undeterred, Theo’s mother sought private instruction for her daughter from a young British sculptor named Henry Hudson Kitson with whom she began



Henry Hudson Kitson

A sculptor, like his wife, Henry Hudson Kitson would later in life be plagued with debilities that stalled his work and may have contributed to his separation from his wife and children. Photo by J. P. Purdy, 1901. Henry Hudson and Theo Alice Ruggles Kitson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

studying in 1886. When Henry went to Paris in the summer of 1887, young Theo, chaperoned by her mother, accompanied him to continue her studies abroad.⁹

Kitson became immersed in her work and the opportunities available in Paris. In 1888, she exhibited a work in plaster titled *Shepherd Lad* as well



Aux Bords de L'Oise (On the Banks of the Oise) (1889)

This work, executed in 1889, brought Theo Kitson substantial praise. The sculpture has since been lost. Photo circa 1889–90. Henry Hudson and Theo Alice Ruggles Kitson papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

as a bronze bust, *Italian Girl*, at the Paris Salon.¹⁰ Only seventeen years old, Kitson became the youngest sculptor whose work was accepted to the prestigious exhibition.¹¹ Unfortunately, her achievement was attributed to a “Mr. Ruggles” in an article about the show, the obvious assumption being that a woman, let alone a girl still in her teens, would not be able to execute such accomplished sculptures.¹²

Kitson's European studies continued to bring her acclaim. The following year, 1889, two of Kitson's works were accepted for exhibition. One was simply described as "bust of a child," but the second, *On the Banks of the Oise*, was awarded an honorable mention.¹³ Kitson was the first American woman sculptor to be recognized with this distinction.¹⁴ It was rumored that the United States Commissioner of the Fine Arts, General Rush C. Hawkins, used Kitson's bust of a child as the standard by which to judge other works.¹⁵

Presumably now lost and known only through a photograph, *On the Banks of the Oise* is a remarkably mature work for a sculptor only eighteen years old. A nude boy, perhaps eight years of age, rests comfortably on his right hip while gazing before him at imaginary water. With his legs bent, the child props himself up with his right arm, while his left hand wraps across the lower part of both legs. The physique reveals the lean anatomy of childhood and the boy's ease with his own nakedness. His face retains the sweetness of youth; his rumpled hair seems to indicate that he has recently been swimming. For an artist who had been studying sculpture for only approximately four years, the subtlety and accuracy of the child's anatomy, as well as the expressiveness of the hands and feet, are remarkable, as surely the judges noted.

Kitson's final year abroad was also a triumphant one. *Young Orpheus* earned another honorable mention for Kitson at the 1890 Paris Salon, while her teacher won a gold medal. One article, "A Boston Girl Who Has Won Mentions and Medals in Europe," appearing in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, noted that:

The compliments of Meissonier, the painter and Fremiet, the famous French sculptor, which were freely given Miss Ruggles, would have been gratifying enough for mother (Mrs. Ruggles) and child but to receive a distinction which was never before accorded to an American sculptor, and over the heads of several American sculptors recognized for years as worthy of important commissions from states and individuals, was glory indeed.¹⁶

Frank T. Robinson, the reporter who identified her as a "genius," stated that Kitson's submissions were the only works by a woman artist accepted into the Salon that year. Her much older, male competitors gave Kitson a standing ovation when she received her honorable mention.¹⁷ Typical for the time period (and often still evident today), biased praise came Kitson's way from an art reviewer of the Universal Exposition of 1888–90, who wrote, "The work is remarkable, given her age and gender."¹⁸ Clearly, the reviewer's

statement underscores the belief that artistic genius in a woman was contrary to the “laws of nature” that endowed only men with the creative spark necessary for great works of art. Kitson concurred with the judges’ appraisal, asserting:

I think I like my “Orpheus” best. I hardly know why, but it represents a great deal to me. I love even the rabbit at his feet! The “Orpheus” I did absolutely alone. I was in Paris and Mr. Kitson in Boston, so that I was dependent wholly upon myself. People have a pleasant way of saying, you know, that a pupil “must” have had help from the teacher if she does anything creditable, so when I did my “Orpheus” with Mr. Kitson so far away that he could not possibly help me, and had it accepted at the Salon, and got a “mention” on it, I confess to feeling thoroughly pleased.¹⁹

Indeed, Kitson was so confident with this work that she submitted it, along with *On the Banks of the Oise*, to the Fine Arts Palace at the Columbian World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893.²⁰

A popular subject in art, Orpheus, as imagined by Kitson, is an innovative interpretation of the ancient story.²¹ Seated on a tree trunk with a small drape to cover him, Orpheus plays a simple horn rather than the more traditional lyre. Facing him across a small patch of earth, a large hare listens, transfixed by the child’s enchanting music. The hare’s long ears are taut with attentiveness. Kitson cleverly connected the two entities visually by extending the boy’s legs. The gradual slope of his legs visually transitions the viewer’s eye to the rounded silhouette of the hare’s back. Orpheus’s right limb seems to gently nudge the animal’s left front flank. Rather than join the figures physically, Kitson set each in its own space so that the boy and hare may be viewed separately as well as a cohesive piece.²² In this way, Kitson found an interesting and satisfying solution to the challenge of multigure sculpture.

Young Orpheus bears similarities to *On the Banks of the Oise*. The children in both sculptures are roughly the same age. Judging by the likeness of their faces and physiques, Kitson may have employed the same model for both sculptures, and both sculptures were exhibited at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Salon judges praised the liveliness and vitality of Kitson’s sculpting. One critic commented about *On the Banks of the Oise* in 1891, “Over this figure, one can feel positive enthusiasm. It is very natural and yet in the highest degree ideal.”²³ The compliments continued:



Young Orpheus

This sculpture was a personal favorite of Theo Kitson's. She may have used the model from *On the Banks of the Oise*. 1890 photo. Henry Hudson and Theo Alice Ruggles papers. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The curving lines of delineation, the [illegible] and life-like [illegible] but with that the softness and beauty of palpitating life which are manifested in excellencies [sic] usually to be seen only in the most finished work of the French modern sculptors.²⁴

Similar words would be applied to Kitson’s sculptures throughout her career.

AWAY FROM THE STUDIO

In 1893, the twenty-seven-year-old Theo married Henry Kitson in a large ceremony in Boston. Kitson lived in an era that expected newlywed women to start families soon after marriage. However, in her first year of matrimony, Kitson also completed a project commissioned by the women of Michigan for the 1893 Columbian World’s Fair in Chicago, to create a sculpture of a boy and girl holding branches to represent the woods of that state. In 1895, her *Athlete* was dedicated at Brown University. Another work, *Esek Hopkins*, honoring the Revolutionary War hero, was unveiled in 1897 in Providence, Rhode Island.

Although Kitson deviated from social norms in some ways, such as pursuing an education and profession, she and Henry, as expected, had three children: Dorothy, 1894; Eugene St. John, known as John, 1897; and Theo R., called Babsy, 1903, with whom Kitson collaborated on *Victory*, one of her last sculptures. Despite the demands of a young family, both husband and wife continued obtaining commissions. Family life did not seem to slow Theo’s artistic ambitions. Her major commissions, a number of which are examined below, were executed while her children were growing up. However, the family may have had financial pressures. Indeed, the demands of a young family and the vagaries of a livelihood earned through precarious and sometimes infrequent commissions, with their drawn-out competitions and approvals, seemed to weigh on Henry as well. In 1896, Henry wrote to the Rhode Island School of Design, seeking positions for himself and/or Theo as instructors in the Modeling Department. If either artist had been hired, the position would have provided a steady income to offset the inconsistency of commissioned work.

In the early 1900s, Henry’s well-being became a concern. According to his diaries, he struggled with undiagnosed health issues that today might be characterized as mental illness. Because of this, Theo twice postponed the completion of her *Mother Bickerdyke* sculpture to assist him with the finalization of *Patrick Collins* and *Minute Man*, for both of which she received credit. Perhaps because of Henry’s infirmities, their marriage became strained, and the two sculptors separated in 1909. Never legally divorcing, the couple collaborated on at least one commission in 1929, *Sir Richard Saltonstall*, in Watertown, Massachusetts. After 1909, Theo moved

to Farmington, Massachusetts, where she maintained a studio until her death in 1932 in Boston.

THE HIKER (1906)

Kitson's most reproduced work was *The Hiker*, a soldier monument to honor the lost men of the Spanish-American War, which lasted from April to August 1898.²⁵ Kitson's first *Hiker* was a commission from the University of Minnesota to honor the young men who enlisted in the short-lived conflict. The idea for such a memorial is recorded in the 1901 issue of *The Minnesota Alumni Weekly*, spurred by Professor Arthur Haynes, to memorialize participants with "a military statue, moulded [sic] in bronze."²⁶ From this rather unlikely origin, the monument proliferated, with at least fifty casts produced by the Gorham Manufacturing Company, which had reproduction rights. Believed by art historians to be one of the most replicated sculptures in this country, Kitson's *Hiker* honors the common foot soldier of the Spanish-American War.²⁷ Soldiers of this war referred to themselves as "hikers," whereas those of World War I were "doughboys" and soldiers of World War II were "G.I. Joes."

Kitson redefined the heroic military monument by depicting the low-ranking man, rather than the better known "Rough Riders," who fought beside Theodore Roosevelt. It would have been logical for Kitson to mount her soldiers on horses, as the equestrian sculpture was a typical combination for military monuments. Instead, Kitson brought her soldiers closer to the viewer's level, physically, emotionally, and metaphorically.²⁸ Perhaps it is Kitson's reshaping of the military memorial that caused this sculpture to become both a vehicle for and icon of reconciliation between Union and Confederate factions. The Spanish-American War was this country's first post-Civil War conflict, bringing northern and southern soldiers together.²⁹

WOUNDED COLOR SERGEANT (1914)

The Wounded Color Sergeant is rather rare in Kitson's oeuvre because it depicts two figures. It is also rather uncommon in war memorials to depict an injured soldier. The 1914 Civil War monument in Topsfield, Massachusetts, is another highly unusual interpretation of the genre, differing from the typical heroic memorial that glorifies war and soldiers. One of Kitson's more dynamic compositions, it creates strong diagonals between two figures, one recumbent and the other striding forward, in contrasting poses. The wounded color sergeant struggles against complete collapse, with his left arm bracing his upper body. His right hand seems to have passed off the banner



***The Hiker* (1906)**

This bronze sculpture, also known as *The Volunteer*, was first cast in 1906. It stands seven feet tall. It has been installed in various locations in the U.S. Photo courtesy of Robert Michael Freeman.



Wounded Color Sergeant (1927)

This 1914 Civil War monument is one of the few Kitson compositions that featured two figures. Dimensions unknown. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Thomsen.

to the other soldier who strides forward with purpose. The charging soldier’s legs straddle the injured man; the rifle in his left hand echoes diagonal of the flag. The overall effect is energetic and more uplifting than the sculpture’s title might suggest. Aside from *Young Orpheus*, only one other time did Kitson combine two figures in a composition: *Mother Bickerdyke*, which will be examined later in this article.

Kitson was selected from among three sculptors who submitted proposals for the Topsfield commission. Dr. Justin Allen, first president of the Topsfield Historical Society, may have conceived the idea of a wounded color sergeant in addition to underwriting the cost of the monument.³⁰ Kitson’s interpretation effectively captures the dangers of the color sergeant’s role in combat. Although a desirable position, it came with a high mortality rate. Stationed near the commanding officer to identify his position and serve as a rallying point, color sergeants carried no rifles, defending themselves only with the swords at their sides. Judging by the brief length of time between the artist’s selection on May 2, 1913, and the memorial’s dedication on July 25, 1914, Kitson’s *Wounded Color Sergeant* successfully fulfilled its purpose.

MOTHER BICKERDYKE (1920)

Kitson’s *Mother Bickerdyke* memorial for Galesburg, Illinois, was unveiled in 1920. This monumental bronze is one of the first sculptures in this country to honor a woman.³¹ Interestingly, Kitson’s model was selected over other submissions including that of Lorado Taft (1860–1936), a renowned teacher, sculptor, and art critic.³²

Mary Ann Ball Bickerdyke (1817–1901) was a Civil War nurse and hospital administrator.³³ Born in Ohio, Bickerdyke had lived in Galesburg for only three years when she began caring for sick and wounded Union soldiers. Bickerdyke brought supplies from Galesburg to the 22nd Illinois Regiment stationed at a military camp in Cairo when no one else would make the dangerous and arduous trip. This delivery spurred her lifetime commitment to nursing care and hospital administration.

Fittingly, the Bickerdyke monument was funded by the Illinois chapter of the Women’s Relief Corps, which sought and received financial support from the State of Illinois. Although Kitson offered to design the memorial for free, she won the \$5,000 commission after her four-foot-by-five-foot painted proposal was selected from six submissions.³⁴ The appropriateness of a woman artist sculpting this heroine was not lost on the selection committee. Union General Oliver O. Howard, with whom the Mother Bickerdyke Memorial Association conferred about the commission, supported this rather “feminist” combination. The Bickerdyke monument is the only Civil War memorial of

a female subject executed by a woman sculptor.³⁵ In addition, the Bickerdyke sculpture is the only Civil War monument that honors the contributions of a specific woman, although seven other statues in various states, erected between 1912 and 1926, commemorate the role of Confederate women in general.

Cast in bronze and resting atop a granite base, the figures of Mother Bickerdyke and a young soldier rise to a height of approximately eight feet. Weighing an estimated fourteen tons, the sculpture has a plaque at the bottom that quotes General William Tecumseh Sherman: "She outranks me." Bickerdyke was reportedly the only woman whom Sherman allowed in his camp. She earned a reputation for her unbending will in procuring supplies for the wounded soldiers in her care. Sherman's quote exemplifies Bickerdyke's willingness to confront any rank or authority in her zeal to complete her nursing mission.

Kitson's pairing of the two adult figures is unusual in her oeuvre. Bent on one knee, Mother Bickerdyke tends to the young fighter recumbent before her. Bracing his head and upper body on her torso and left knee, the Civil War nurse lifts a small cup to the man's mouth. By bending Bickerdyke's head over that of her patient and stressing the woman's intent focus on her patient, Kitson directs the viewer's attention to him as well.

Although the soldier receives primary attention, Mother Bickerdyke's facial features reflect surprising accuracy. Kitson sought to capture the woman's physical and emotional likeness, interviewing veterans who knew her to get a sense of her character and personality. Indeed, comparison between photographs of Bickerdyke and Kitson's sculpture show the center-parted hair, severe features, and mouth that one would expect of such a fearless crusader for the care of wounded soldiers.

The completion of the monument was delayed twice before being unveiled to the public. Henry Kitson presented his wife's proposal to the monument committee in 1904, anticipating that the project would take no longer than eighteen months.³⁶ When her husband became ill, Theo postponed the completion of her own commission to finish Henry's *Minute Man* and *Patrick Collins* sculptures. Kitson was on hand for her work's unveiling in 1906. Standing alongside members of the Bickerdyke family and in front of eight thousand onlookers, Kitson watched Illinois veterans dedicate her work.

The combination of nurturing (active) female and collapsed (passive) male prompts a comparison to the religious pairing of Michelangelo's *Pieta*: the Virgin Mary cradling the crucified Christ in her lap. Metaphorically and formally, the connection between the secular and sacred pairing certainly



Mother Bickerdyke (1907)

This sculpture depicts Civil War nurse Mary Ann Ball Bickerdyke tending to a soldier at the battlefield. This memorial is located in Galesburg, Illinois, Bickerdyke's home. Bronze, approximately eight feet. Photo courtesy of T.J. Carson, Tri States Public Radio.

would not have been lost on viewers. To accurately relate the two figures to one another, Kitson worked from live models. Yet, as sculptors such as Michelangelo discovered, the figural proportions needed alteration to create a harmonious composition. Kitson deviated from accurate realism in Mother Bickerdyke's figure. Her left leg is equal in size to the upper body of the soldier she holds, thereby resulting in a larger-than-life figure. In the same way, Michelangelo's female figure would dwarf that of her son if the two were viewed as separate sculptures.

In this secular pairing, Kitson both subverts and adheres to expectations. In the *Pieta*, Mary occupies a secondary role, both formally and thematically. Kitson positioned the soldier in the most prominent place, thus casting Mother Bickerdyke as a supporting figure in the gendered world of war. Although this monument was created to honor the heroic efforts of an individual woman, Bickerdyke's features are largely hidden from a frontal viewpoint. Emphasizing the young soldier maintained the status quo of monumental bronze statues that honor male heroes. Kitson's sculpture recognized Bickerdyke as well as the common soldier whose contribution to the Civil War was largely unheralded and thus mollified any detractors who objected to a monument honoring a woman.

In the *Pieta*, Mary serves as a prop to support Christ's body. Altering this model, Kitson included the wounded patient as a necessary part of the sculpture to elucidate Bickerdyke's role. In this way, *Mother Bickerdyke* subverts the traditional war memorial by focusing on a woman and enlisted man. Perhaps by 1906, Kitson had learned to navigate the gendered and restrictive arena of war memorials as they had been defined by her male peers and the (presumably male) viewing public, incorporating the requirements of the commission with the expectations of the general public for war memorials.

This unusual pairing of a particular, real-life heroine with a generic low-ranking soldier had potential to be a contentious project as it deviated from the model of triumphant leaders on horseback. From commentaries of the time, the sculpture satisfied all constituencies while seemingly serving the artist's own mission. At least one writer recognized the statue's uniqueness in furthering the North and South on the "Road to Reconciliation" in 1917:

It is singular that a woman should have come nearer to solving the question of How to Reconcile Civic Art of the Present with the Old Soldiers' Monument Ideals than any mere man or civic organization. Yet, Theo Alice Ruggles Kitson has accomplished that remarkable feat. A bit of analysis will serve to pointedly show why this has been the case. To begin with, Mrs. Kitson instinctively

portrays The Fighting Man. Whether beholding her wonderful Captain Parker at Lexington or her Civil War lad at Vicksburg, or any other of this woman’s work, you realize that the real, average ideal soldier at “Attention” or “On the March” has been in her mind.³⁷

The author continued:

The very fact, however, of Mrs. Kitson being able to make a soldier’s monument that was “different,” and yet suit all factions, served as perhaps the most subtle of all the causes that have aroused present-day divergencies [sic] in “Civic Art” and G.A.R. monument notions.³⁸

Kitson’s *Mother Bickerdyke* sculpture was indeed “different” for its era. Kitson worked within the gendered confines of war monuments by drawing viewers’ attention primarily to the soldier, and then secondarily to Bickerdyke herself. The irony of this subversion has not been lost on more contemporary historians. At the 2006 rededication of the sculpture, Paulette Thenhaus commented:

Today, looking at the Mother Bickerdyke Memorial in terms of war memorials, we see how original a work of art it is. It breaks with traditional memorials which glorify war and portray the soldier as hero. Instead it represents a simple act of human kindness in the aftermath of battle. The “action” takes place at ground level and at the viewer’s eye level. No horses or weapons are involved. The only action is the offering of a cup of water, yet Kitson elevates this gesture to an act of honor.³⁹

Kitson further destabilized and redefined the war memorial by showing the young soldier recumbent rather than heroically erect. What might be seen as a “feminization” of the male war genre by Kitson opened the door to greater freedom in the interpretation of war memorials years later by artists such as Maya Lin, creator of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC.⁴⁰

VICKSBURG NATIONAL MILITARY PARK (1910–1920)

In the years between 1910 and 1920, Kitson kept busy with commissions from Vicksburg National Military Park. During this ten-year period, she completed an astonishing seventy-three busts and reliefs of Civil War leaders, as well as two state monuments. While the sculptures may have become

rather formulaic for Kitson, they must have provided a reliable source of income necessary to support herself and her family.

For the Massachusetts State Memorial, the first such monument placed at Vicksburg, Kitson executed *The Volunteer*, which was mounted on a fifteen-ton boulder from Massachusetts. The three regiments that participated in the Vicksburg battles are engraved on the sides. When it was sited in 1903, Kitson declined the invitation to unveil her statue, extending her vision of reconciliation by having the daughter of a Confederate soldier complete the task instead.⁴¹ Today, Kitson is recognized as the “most prolifically represented artist in the park” with a total of seventy-five works credited to her hand, including the Iowa State Memorial.⁴²

Critics such as Lorado Taft grudgingly acknowledged Kitson’s talent with *The Volunteer*. In 1901, he wrote:

In the presence of this spirited and ably composed work one is almost compelled to qualify the somewhat sweeping assertion that no woman has as yet modeled the male figure to look like a man. Her talent is robust and she attacks fearlessly the problems of monumental statuary.⁴³

TADEUSZ KOSCIUSZKO (1927)

Prior to Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, war monuments were typically dedicated to one individual hero or leader. During the peak years of Kitson’s career, roughly 1900 to 1930, such monumental icons were abundant in the Boston Public Garden. Two examples are Augustus Saint-Gaudens’ *The Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment* (1897) on Beacon Street and Daniel Chester French’s *The Angel of the Waters*, (1924) at Beacon and Arlington Streets.

In 1927, Kitson contributed to the sculpture of the Boston Public Garden with her bronze statue of hero Tadeusz Kosciuszko (1746–1817), a Polish native who fought for the colonists in the Revolutionary War.⁴⁴ Kosciuszko had studied engineering and artillery in France, and like other foreign supporters of democracy such as the Marquis de Lafayette, he volunteered his services to the Continental Army. In his capacity as colonel of the engineers, Kosciuszko oversaw the fortifications of the future United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, in 1778, fulfilling the role for which he had been personally selected by George Washington. Exemplifying his commitment to the new nation, Kosciuszko was one of the founders of the Society of the Cincinnati, a patriotic organization established by participants

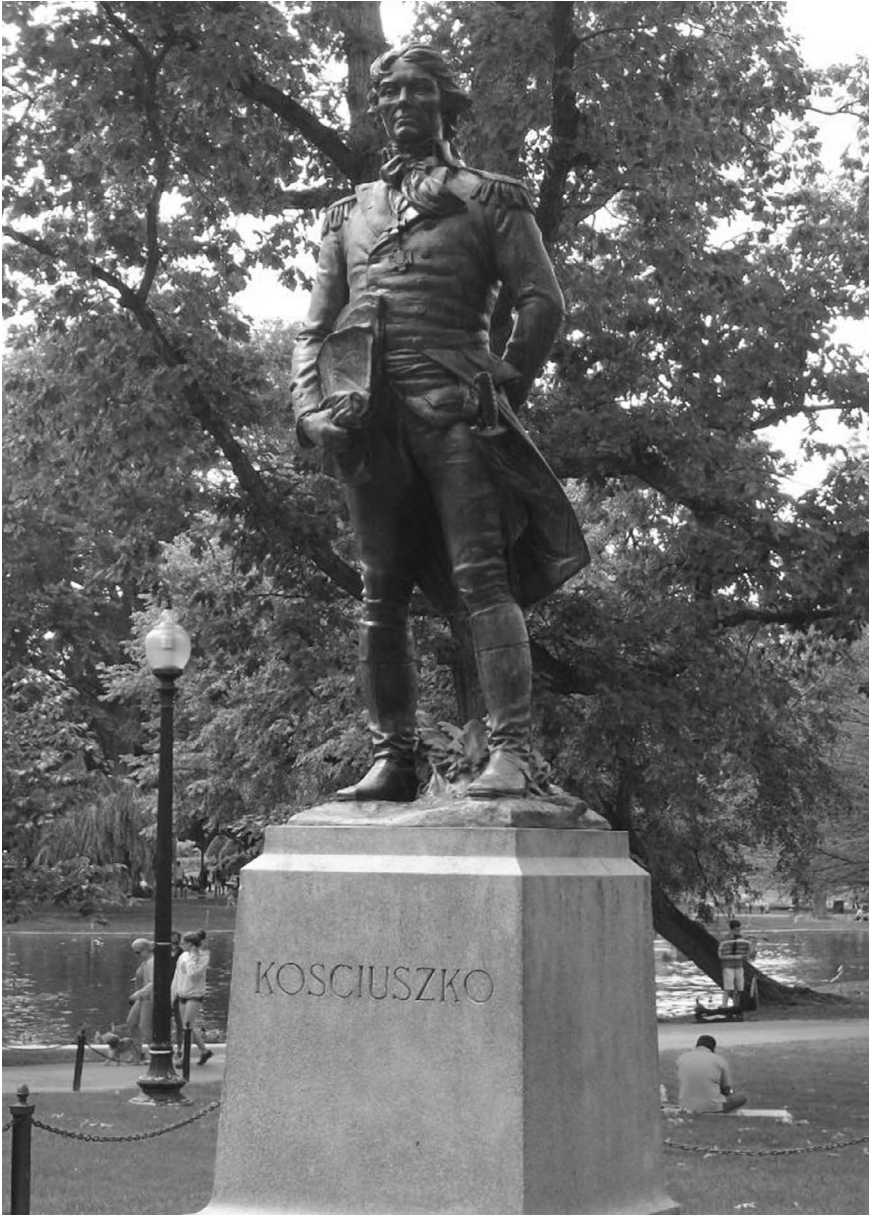
in the Revolutionary War whose membership is open to qualified male descendants.

Kitson received the commission from the Massachusetts Polish Society by submitting a design that was selected from among fifteen other proposals. Completed when Kitson was fifty-six years old, it was one of her last major works. With this assignment, Kitson adhered to the requirements of the heroic military figure, yet she interpreted this type in her own way, continuing on the path begun with her Bickerdyke sculpture. The figure itself measures nine feet, while its pink granite base stands at six feet. Facing Boylston and Arlington Streets, it stands near similar statues of other iconic figures such as George Washington (1869) by Thomas Ball and Union Colonel Thomas Cass (1899) by Richard Brooks. Kitson's figure stands calmly, looking into the distance. On the colonel's left side is a saber, while in his right hand he holds the plans and specifications for the West Point battlements in front of his body; only two military medals hang from his neck. Unlike most war memorials that stress the triumphant aspect of war as embodied in heroic leaders and ignore its destructive consequences, Kitson chose to emphasize Kosciuszko's enduring contribution as creator of this country's oldest continuously occupied military post within the United States.

Evidence indicates that the monument was well received. Contemporary Lorado Taft had previously praised Kitson's efforts, noting that she was "especially successful" in renderings of military figures, which he particularly liked for their "life and vigor."⁴⁵ Other comments described it as "remarkable" with "sterling characteristic" evident throughout.⁴⁶

Kitson's sculpture also seems to have pleased the Massachusetts Polish Society. The unveiling ceremony lasted all day long and was attended by the Polish ambassador along with 100,000 national, state, and city officials and 20,000 Polish men, women, and children who participated in a street parade. The ceremony must have been remarkable:

... music, combined to make a procession that for size and color was one of the most impressive spectacles to be seen in Boston in recent years. Many of the marchers wore native costume. There were floats presenting Poland's long fight for liberty. Veterans of the World War paraded with the national colors and new blue gray overseas uniforms. Children were resplendent in star-spangled dresses, the red and white of Poland, the uniforms of Polish soldiers or white American sailor suits. Side by side with the Stars and Stripes floated the crimson banner of Poland with its wide winged white eagle.⁴⁷



Tadeusz Kosciuszko (1927)

Theo Kitson's memorial to the Polish hero of the Revolutionary War stands in the Boston Public Garden. Bronze, approximately eight feet. Photo courtesy of Christine C. Neal.

While not detracting from Kosciuszko's military accomplishments, Kitson chose to emphasize the enduring contribution the Polish native made to the United States. In this work, Kitson subverted the genre of war memorials dedicated to courageous men by emphasizing the subject's intelligence rather than his military prowess. Of the sculptures of Kosciuszko around this country, Kitson's rendering is the least overtly "militaristic." Those in Detroit and Milwaukee show the Polish hero on a horse, while depictions in Philadelphia and Washington, DC, portray Kosciuszko wearing his military hat. Only the statue in Lodz, Poland, shares Kitson's less formal, less martial interpretation.

VICTORY (1929)

Appropriately, Kitson's career came full circle with her last large-scale work in 1929, *Victory*, locally referred to as "Iron Horse." This sculpture once again displayed Kitson's ability to render equines. A bare-footed warrior, dressed in classical garb with a sheathed sword attached at his left side, rides his mount bareback. A shield hangs from his back. He holds aloft a torch in his right hand and in his left he bears a laurel branch, the ubiquitous symbol of victory.⁴⁸

Completed in 1929 for Hingham, Massachusetts, *Victory* is also credited to Kitson's daughter, Theo R. Kitson. Town records provide no reason for the collaboration, although Kitson's fifty-eight years may have necessitated assistance. The model was chosen from a contest submission and is recognized "as the most heroic" of the monuments found there.⁴⁹ Rather than commemorate soldiers from a specific war, *Victory* honors all Hingham veterans, beginning with the Revolutionary War.

In this late work, Kitson once again adheres to and subverts artistic conventions. In general, laurel branches are held aloft in a gesture of triumph. Perhaps Kitson intended its lowered position to be interpreted as a subtle condemnation of war, an ironic commentary from a sculptor known for soldier monuments.

CONCLUSION

Although Kitson broke ground as a woman artist who created war memorials praised by both veterans and civilians, the "genius" sculptor has largely been overlooked by scholars and the public.⁵⁰ The reasons for any female artist's inclusion or exclusion (purposeful or unintentional) are rarely clear. Many American patrons still considered European culture to be superior to that of the United States. Artists who lived and worked in Rome, such as Harriet Hosmer and others of the "marmorean flock" (female sculptors),



Theo Kitson and Daughter.
Victory

Photo courtesy of the Hingham Historical Commission.

perhaps garnered a degree of panache attractive to elite patrons who had gone on the Grand Tour of European cities.⁵¹ Even today, many American artists feel compelled to make the requisite pilgrimage to see the old masters as part of their education, as Kitson herself did as a young student. Or perhaps returning to the area of her youth diminished Kitson's artistic stature and pigeon-holed her as merely a local artist.

In addition, Kitson sold her work through a foundry's catalogue, that of the Gorham Manufacturing Company. This may have been considered beyond the bounds of fine art, aligning too closely with crass commercialization. Indeed, the Gorham Manufacturing Company seems to have been pivotal in advertising and distributing Kitson's work, particularly in the case of *The Hiker*. Although the Ruggles family seemed financially secure, Kitson may

have felt pressure to increase her income after separating from Henry. Clearly, retail promotion had its positive and negative aspects that both served Kitson well and, perhaps, diminished her reputation.

Bronze sculpture lent itself to reproduction as marble could not. In the hierarchy of materials and mediums, unique works are more highly valued than multiples, whether they are bronze-cast reproductions, prints on paper, or photographs. The fact that Gorham could offer Kitson’s work in different sizes may have also diminished the status of her work in the eyes of some critics.

Moreover, the nature of Kitson’s work—monumental, public, and bronze memorials—did not lend itself easily to museum exhibitions.⁵² Many of these works were already on view and somewhat accessible to the public, although they could not be gathered together in the form of a retrospective exhibition. Scale models could be shown, but these are not as appealing as viewing the full-size, finished sculptures. This factor has also made it difficult for critics and scholars to examine her work in its entirety.⁵³

One can never fully delineate the reasons that some artists, male or female, become part of the canon and others don’t. Vincent van Gogh sold only one work during his lifetime, yet as tastes have changed, his work is now among the most highly valued in western art. Perhaps Kitson’s representations of the common soldier deviated too far from the triumphalism thought to be desirable in war memorials. However, with recent works like that of Maya Lin’s Vietnam War Memorial, Kitson’s conception of this genre as a potential tool for reconciliation seems once again timely. Kitson honored the common soldier, allowing all citizens from both North and South the possibility of relating to her figures.

During her lifetime, *The Boston Globe* praised Kitson as “One Of World’s Best Sculptors.”⁵⁴ Throughout her career, Kitson was regularly described as a “genius.” Perhaps this description singled out Kitson as an anomaly, an interesting phenomenon who could be disregarded as a “revolt against nature” by art historians. Sadly, achieving critical success and being labeled a “genius” did not, in Kitson’s case, ensure a place in the canon, which she so clearly deserves.

HJM

Notes

1. “Camille Claudel,” *New World Encyclopedia*, May 6, 2008, <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org> (Accessed Oct. 6, 2015). Although this is a widely cited quote by French art critic and writer Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917), its exact source

could not be located. For more on French sculptor Camille Claudel, see Odile Ayrault-Clauze, *Camille Claudel: A Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002) and Reine-Marie Paris, *Camille: The Life of Camille Claudel, Rodin's Muse and Mistress* (Boston: Little Brown & Co, 1989).

2. Ken Liss. "From Snow Sculptures to the Paris Salon and Beyond." *Muddy River Musings*, December 2009. Published online in: <http://brooklinehistory.blogspot.com> (accessed Sept. 25, 2011).

3. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Henry Hudson and Theo Alice Ruggles Kitson Papers, Reel #3931. Charlotte Streifer Rubenstein gives the year of Kitson's election to the National Sculpture Society as 1895 in *American Women Sculptors: A History of Women Working in Three Dimensions* (Boston: GK Hall, 1990), 103. National Sculpture Society Archives, via email from Elizabeth Helm, National Sculpture Society/*Sculpture Review*, October 12, 2012, confirmed the year as 1893, the year that the National Sculpture Society was founded. Bessie Potter Vonnoh was the next woman member, listed in the 1898 membership book.

4. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931. "[missing] Has Great Genius." July 7, 1902.

5. The Vicksburg National Military Park website lists Kitson as creator of seventy-three busts and relief portraits.

6. Numerous articles have been written about "genius" and the gendered nature of its use as a label.

7. Eleanor Tufts. *American Women Artists 1830-1920* (Washington, DC: The National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1987), 51. While the "woman question" was a concern, Whitney's relative inexperience also troubled the committee. The commission ultimately went to Thomas Ball.

8. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931.

9. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3930.

10. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3930. *Italian Girl* won a bronze medal in the fall of 1887 at the Mechanics Exhibition. Other sources indicate that Kitson also showed *Fisherman*.

11. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3930.

12. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931. [missing], Thursday, May 24, 1888. The artist was not yet married to Henry Hudson Kitson at that time, thus she used her maiden name, Ruggles.

13. Artists were permitted to show two sculptures maximum.

14. As noted by Rubenstein in *American Woman Sculptors*, Elisabeth Gardner won a gold medal in painting prior to Kitson's honorable mention. In addition, Elisabet

Ney exhibited plaster busts as early as 1861 but was not an American citizen at that time.

15. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931. Frank T. Robinson. "Miss Ruggles, The Sculptor." *Boston Evening Transcript*, August 16, 1890.

16. Ibid.

17. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931.

18. Ruth Nickerson, "A Vanguard of American Women Sculptors," *Sculpture Review* 35, no. 4 (Winter 1986/87): 16.

19. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931. "Miss Ruggles, Sculptor, Has a Breathing Spell."

20. It may have won a bronze medal; records are not clear. Interestingly and perhaps not coincidentally, Sophia G. Hayden of Boston was selected as the architect of the Women's Building.

21. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931.

22. Ibid.

23. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931. [illegible] 17, 1891, "Artistic Productions: Display of Sculpture at the School of Design."

24. Ibid.

25. It seems that discussions for the commission began in 1901, but they were not approved until 1906. See *The Minnesota Alumni Weekly*, March 5, 1906, vol. 5, no. 23, p. 10. The article credits Theo as the sculptor of this work. However, on p. 9, an announcement stating the date of the dedication as May 30 asserts, "Mr. Kitson, the sculptor, will be at the University not later than May 24 to erect the completed figure."

26. *The Minnesota Alumni Weekly*, vol. 1, no. 5, October 14, 1901.

27. Also referred to as *The Volunteer*, this sculpture is used in some locations to test acid rain, air pollution, and the effects of the corrosion of bronze.

28. While copies of Kitson's *Hiker* can be found throughout the United States, she was not the only sculptor to memorialize the soldiers of the Spanish-American War. Allen George Newman (1875–1940) was one of several artists who also executed a hiker, although his version was not as popular as Kitson's bronze. Included in the canon of American sculptors, Newman also created *Tribute to the Women of the Confederacy* in 1915, for Jacksonville, FL, a monument that predates Kitson's *Mother Bickerdyke* by five years. Comparisons between Kitson's oeuvre and that of her male contemporaries who executed monuments thematically similar to hers need further exploration.

29. *The Minnesota Alumni Weekly*, vol. 5, no. 35½, June 4, 1906, p. 10.

30. Topsfield Historical Society Archives.

31. It seems that Kitson sculpted another female figure, now presumably lost, of Deborah Samson, a woman who fought in the Revolutionary War disguised as a man.

32. Knox College Archives. *Daily Republican Register*, September 15, 1903, p. 8, "Contract let to Mrs. Theo Ruggles Kitson of Boston — A Beautiful Statuary." Thirteen out of fourteen people on the selection committee voted for Kitson's proposal. Taft was on this committee, although his vote is unknown.
33. Bickerdyke received a special pension from Congress beginning in 1886 for \$25 per month. There is also a hospital boat and liberty ship named for her. Coincidentally, an article entitled "Mother Bickerdyke, What She Did as a Nurse in the Army" appeared on the same page as "Miss Ruggles, The Sculptor" in the *Boston Evening Transcript* on August 16, 1890, many years prior to the conception of the sculpture.
34. Barbara Schock, "The Mother Bickerdyke Monument at Galesburg, Illinois." Paulette Thenhaus, "Theo Alice Ruggles Kitson 1872–1932," <http://www.thezephyr.com> (accessed August 9, 2011). Interestingly, Kitson was not present at the selection of her proposal but was represented by her husband. See also *The Daily-Republican Register*.
35. Cynthia Mills and Pamela Simpson, eds., *Monuments to the Lost Cause: Women, Art and Landscapes of Southern Memory* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 183–188.
36. Records do not indicate why Kitson's husband presented her proposal to the monument committee.
37. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931. "The Artist's Idea of a Proper Soldier's Monument," Jan. 6, 1917, n.p. Author unknown.
38. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931.
39. Paulette Thenhaus, "Theo Alice Ruggles Kitson." In this local newspaper article, written for the 2006 rededication of the monument, Thenhaus posits that Lorado Taft may have been responsible for Kitson's receiving the commission. *The Zephyr* is available online at <http://www.thezephyr.com/bick100.htm>.
40. The author intends to examine this subject in a future article.
41. Ken Liss, *Muddy River Musings*.
42. <http://www.nps.gov/vick/learn/historyculture/theo-alice-ruggles-kitson.htm>, accessed September 1, 2015. Henry Hudson Kitson executed nine works for Vicksburg, including a full-size statue of Jefferson Davis. Allen George Newman also contributed work to Vicksburg.
43. Thenhaus. Taft's remarks were made about Newburyport's *Volunteer*. In *The Zephyr*, available online at <http://www.thezephyr.com/bick100.htm>.
44. Kosciuszko's first name is also given as Thaddeus. Even as late as 1960, Vice President Richard M. Nixon praised Kosciuszko to a Polish audience, stating that the American public was indebted to Kosciuszko for his aid in freeing the colonies from British rule.
45. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3930. *Newburgh Daily Journal Monday Evening*, June 5, 1905 [missing], p. 2.

46. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931.
47. Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931. "Kosciuszko Statue is Unveiled with Colorful Ceremony."
48. Kitson was one of five sculptors to work on the Washington, DC, statue of General William Tecumseh Sherman. Although records credit Kitson with creating only the medallions, the pose of Sherman's horse is remarkably similar to *Victory*. The shapes and breezy flow of the two tails are also alike.
49. From the National Register Criteria Statement, n.d.
50. Kitson's "feminization" of war memorials will be the subject of a future article.
51. The term "marmorean flock" in reference to a group of American women sculptors living abroad is credited to Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun* but "coined by" Henry James.
52. Large-scale marbles also are not easily exhibited.
53. This fact, however, has not kept artists such as Daniel Chester French and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, two sculptors working in large-scale bronze, from critical examination and inclusion in the canon of art history.
54. Archives of American Art. (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), Kitson Papers, Reel #3931. *The Boston Globe*, July 7, 1902, n.p.