Anna Hyatt Huntington’s “Joan of Arc”

by Michelle Marder Kamhi

An innovative program to restore New York City’s deteriorating civic monuments has recently brought to public notice a number of works which ought never to have fallen into obscurity. Outstanding among them is a slightly larger-than-life equestrian statue of Joan of Arc (fig. 1), completed in 1915 by the American sculptor Anna Vaughan Hyatt (born in 1876, she married—and took the surname of—philanthropist Archer Milton Huntington in 1923; she died in 1973).

Inspired by the legend of the Maid of Orleans, Hyatt initiated a major figure of Joan on her own, independent of any commission or competition, in Paris in 1909—the year in which Joan was beati-
ified, prior to her canonization in 1920. Hyatt was then a sculptor mainly of animal figures—for which she is still best known. In view of the social and artistic conventions of the day, it is remarkable that she undertook a full-scale equestrian statue, quite probably the first such monument of a woman by a woman; moreover, she resolved to do all the work herself, without male assistants—including the heavy preparatory work of building the sizable armature and covering it with more than a ton of clay. So it is not surprising that when the piece was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1910, the jury, though very much impressed with the work—according to contemporary accounts—grudged it a mere honorable mention, apparently doubting that it could be the single-handed achievement of a woman.

More fitting recognition followed, however. In 1914, Hyatt was chosen, from among numerous competitors, as the sculptor for a monument to be erected in New York City to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of Joan of Arc’s birth. She reworked and refined her origi-

nal conception, enlarged the scale somewhat, and had the work cast in bronze (the Paris version had been executed only in plaster). Architect John V. Van Pelt—who was likewise selected in an open competition—designed an elegant, historically appropriate Gothic pedestal, nearly thirteen feet high, incorporating stones from the building where Joan had been held prisoner in Rouen and from Rheims Cathedral, which also figured prominently in her history.

Unveiled to great fanfare on December 6, 1915, the monument was praised by critics and enthusiastically received by the public. It swiftly established Hyatt’s reputation, bringing her many honors—including (perhaps most fittingly, given the chivalric spirit of the work) knighthood in the French Legion of Honor. In addition to numerous smaller versions, several full-size replicas of Hyatt’s Joan were made for other cities (see below). But the work eventually fell victim to the harsh urban environment of the later decades of this century: air pollution, vandalism, and neglect—together with the modernist distaste for figurative art—divested it of its former glory. And Anna Hyatt Huntington’s reputation waned, as did that of many another fine figurative artist of her day.

Spiritual, not Physical, Force

Hyatt’s figure of Joan in armor, astride a powerful, wild-eyed steed, seems so natural and lifelike that the sculptor’s achievement can easily be underestimated. One need only compare the work to some of the great bronze equestrian monuments of the past—Donatello’s Cattamalata or Verrocchio’s Colleoni (fig. 3), for example—to see how original and effective it is.

Unlike those imposing Renaissance condottiery, Hyatt’s Joan of Arc is a slight, girlish figure; she commands not so much by physical as by spiritual force. Hyatt wrote:

I thought of her there before her first battle, speaking to her saints, holding up the ancient sword. Her wrist is sharply back to show her soldiers the hilt, which is in the form of a cross. . . . It was only her mental attitude, only her religious fervor, that could have enabled her to endure so much physically, to march three or four days with almost no sleep, to withstand cold and rain. That is how I thought of her; that is how I have tried to model her.

From the inception of the Paris version to the completion of the bronze in New York six years later, the work was shaped not only by the sculptor’s vision and imagination but by her meticulous concern for historical and anatomical detail. In addition to studying various texts of the life of Joan, for example, she consulted a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on early fifteenth-century armor. And though she was an experienced horsewoman, who probably knew enough about equine anatomy and the close relationship between horse and rider to do the figure from memory, she went to considerable trouble to find suitable models for the sturdy mounts in both the Paris and the New York version, and had a niece sit (albeit astride a barrel) for the figure of Joan.

All of that would be of little interest, of course, were it not for the quality of the finished work. Happily, that inspiring monument can again be seen much as it appeared on the wintry day it was first unveiled, splendid in its simplicity, clarity, and strength of form.

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Commemorative Brochure

A handsome illustrated brochure commemorating the recent restoration and rededication of Anna Hyatt Huntington's Joan of Arc monument in New York City has been published by the Municipal Art Society of New York through the generous support of the Grand Marnier Foundation, which also underwrote the conservation work. Edited by Phyllis Samitz Cohen, curator of the "Adopt-A-Monument Program" (a joint project of the private Municipal Art Society and two public agencies—New York City's Art Commission and Parks Department), the brochure contains numerous black-and-white photographs of the work (including details) before and after restoration, as well as a short article by Cohen about the restoration. An informative essay by sculpture historian Beatrice Galman Proske (author of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth: Lyric Sculptor in Artils 6/84), the foremost authority on Huntington's work, sketches the history of the monument. For a free copy of the brochure, write to David S. Wachman Associates, Inc., 353 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10016.

"Joan of Arc" Sites

The original Joan of Arc monument stands at Riverside Drive and 93rd Street in New York City. Full-size replicas of the bronze equestrian figure can be seen in San Francisco, Gloucester (Mass.), Quebec, and Blois (France). Smaller versions are located in Brookgreen Gardens (S.C.) and the Cleveland (Ohio) Museum of Art, and the National Arts Club in New York City, among other collections.

Two illuminating articles (one by Beatrice Proske, the other by Ronald Christ) on Huntington's New York City work appeared in 1986 in a double issue (No. 16/17) of Sites, a literary/architectural magazine published by Lumen, Inc., 446 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011.

Illustrations