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## The Sculpture of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth and New York Dance

Joseph G. Dreiss

*Mary Washington College*

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“WAR IS KIND”

VOLUME XXIX · 1994

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# The Sculpture of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth and New York Dance

BY JOSEPH G. DREISS

*Syracuse University is a good place to study the life and work of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth. The University Art Collection harbors many of her sculptures, and her papers reside in the University Library's Department of Special Collections. The following article draws extensively on the latter.*

*The Harriet Whitney Frishmuth collection contains hundreds of letters and newspaper clippings documenting Frishmuth's career, as well as photographs of the artist's original plaster compositions (which she generally destroyed to limit the editions of her sculptures). A lengthy interview with Frishmuth on audiotape is supplemented by a short movie of her discussing her art and career. There are numerous original works of art by Frishmuth, especially figure studies and a few examples of her sculpture. Other works on paper include ground plans and studies by the architects with whom she collaborated in the creation of her garden statuary and its settings.*

*Frishmuth was invited to give this collection to the Syracuse University Library on her eighty-fourth birthday, 17 September 1964.—J.G.D.*

ABANDONING HERSELF to an upsurge of pure exuberance, a dancer unleashes the boundless energy of youth. *Joy of the Waters* (fig. 1) exemplifies the most significant period in the career of Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, an extraordinary and largely overlooked female sculptor of the early twentieth century. In what follows I will discuss Frishmuth's career, and the influence of New York dance and dancers upon her sensual and dynamic sculptures.

Harriet Whitney Frishmuth (fig. 2) was born in Philadelphia on 17 September 1880 to Frank B. and Louise Berens Frishmuth. Her

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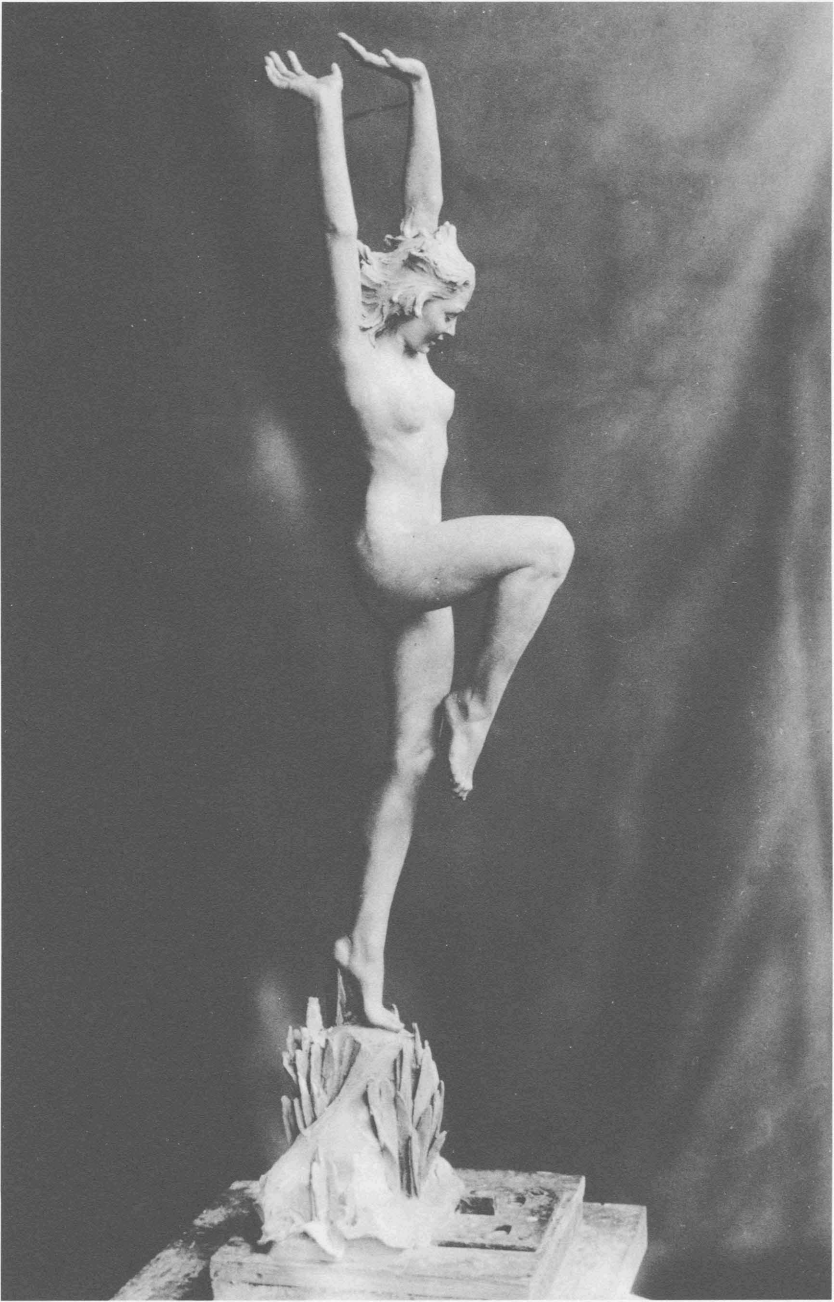


Fig. 1. *Joy of the Waters*. (All photos in this article are courtesy of Syracuse University Library.)

father, uncle, and grandfather were distinguished physicians, which may help explain Harriet's long-standing interest in the human figure.

So much of Harriet's youth was spent in Europe that it is fair to say she was raised and educated abroad. Her mother took Harriet and her two sisters to Europe early on, and they remained there for many years. Harriet attended private schools in Paris and Dresden, and the family spent the summers in Switzerland.

In Switzerland Harriet first began making sculpture:

While there I met a Mrs. Hinton who was a sculptor's wife and I think she was a sculptor herself. She came up to me one evening and said, "What do you do? You look as though you ought to play the violin." I laughed and said, "I don't know one tune from another but I always had a yearning to model but have never had a chance to try it." She replied, "Come on up to my room. I have some plaste-line and we'll see what you can do with it." So I went up to her room and she handed me a lump of plasteline and I started playing with it and modeled from memory a relief of my mother who was downstairs in bed. Mrs. Hinton was very encouraging and decided to give me lessons. We wrote to Italy for some plasteline and I started a bust of my mother built up on a bottle. It turned out to be quite like her. I was very enthusiastic.<sup>1</sup>

After this introduction to sculpture, Frishmuth moved to Paris at the age of nineteen to pursue further study. Initially, she enrolled in a class for women that was critiqued by Auguste Rodin twice a week. Then she enrolled in the Academie Colarossi, where she continued her studies under Henri Desiré Guaquie and Jean Antoine Injalbert.

Although Frishmuth's contact with Rodin was brief, he seems to have exerted the strongest formative influence on the young artist. According to Frishmuth, Rodin taught her to "first always look at the silhouette of a subject and be guided by it; second, remember that movement is the transition from one attitude to another. It is a

1. [Arsine Schmavonian], "Harriet Whitney Frishmuth, American Sculptor," *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier* 9 (October 1971): 22.

bit of what was and a bit of what is to be.”<sup>2</sup> Movement was basic to Rodin’s art. It was, he thought, the essence of life and the vital element in sculpture. Frequently he sketched models as they moved around his studio. Frishmuth’s best known and most important sculptures feature dancing or physically active figures with clear and forceful silhouettes.

After her Parisian studies, Frishmuth gained two years of experience in Berlin as an assistant to Professor Cuno von Euchtritz, with whom she worked on numerous sculptures for that city. Upon returning to New York, she enrolled in the Art Students League, taking up studies with Gutzon Borglum and Herman A. MacNeil. Frishmuth found Borglum an inspiring teacher who “gave me valuable aid and more inspiration for my work than I had ever before received.”<sup>3</sup> She acquired even further training as an assistant to Karl Bitter and also by enrolling at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, where for two years she studied anatomy by dissection.

Around 1908 she finally set up her first studio at 35 Park Avenue, the home of her uncle, Dr. T. Pasmore Berens. During this period she received her first major commission: a bronze bas-relief of Dr. Abraham Jacobi for the New York County Medical Society. She also made a number of small, decorative, utilitarian objects that feature human or animal motives. These objects, such as *Girl and Frog Ashtray* and *Pushing Men Bookends*, were no doubt done for commercial purposes. A number of these works were cast in large editions, and they continued to sell well for many years.<sup>4</sup>

Frishmuth came into her own in 1913 when she and her mother purchased a house and studio at Sniffen Court, a cul-de-sac between East 35th and East 36th streets in New York City. A number of other sculptors, including Edward McCartan and Malvina Hoffman, lived and worked in the remodeled stables of this picturesque

2. [Schmavonian], “Frishmuth,” 22.

3. “Philadelphia Girl’s Art with Chisel,” undated, unidentified newspaper clipping, Harriet Whitney Frishmuth Papers, Department of Special Collections, Syracuse University Library.

4. Janis Conner and Joel Rosenkranz, *Rediscoveries in American Sculpture: Studio Works 1893–1939* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 36.



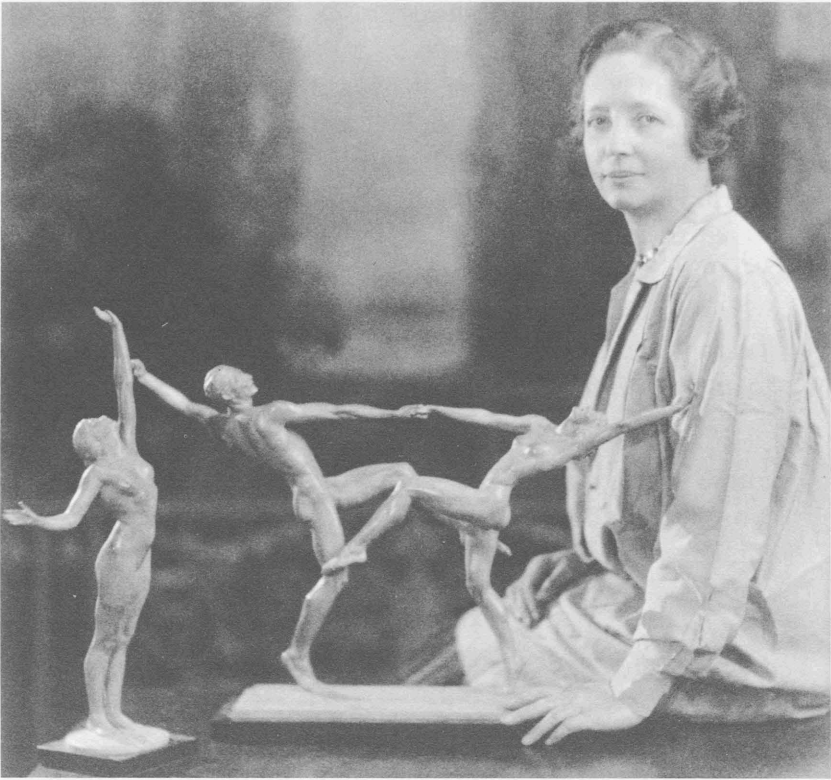


Fig. 2. Harriet Whitney Frishmuth with *The Star and Dancers*.

artists' enclave. Over the next twenty years, Frishmuth was to produce her most significant sculptures there.

Her first large-scale sculptures from this period, conceived as functional objects, have a serene and static quality. *Saki: A Sundial* of 1913, which won Honorable Mention at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, and *The Globe Sundial* are examples of this type. The seated pose of the figure in the latter work reflects none of the vivacious movement that would characterize her signature works of the 1920s.

It was at Sniffen Court that Frishmuth became deeply inspired by the art of dance and particularly of ballet; for at this time she met nineteen-year-old Desha Delteil, a dancer who was herself on the way to international success. A native of Yugoslavia, Desha had

come to the United States at the age of sixteen. She made her debut with the Helen Moeller Dancers in 1917.<sup>5</sup> After being brought to the attention of Michel Fokine, she began dancing with the Fokine Ballet at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Then Hugo Risenfeld, manager of the Rivoli and Rialto theaters in New York, saw her and he immediately hired her. She won instant acclaim for her presentation of the “Bubble Dance,” which she choreographed herself. Her dancing was also featured in the Paramount picture “Glorifying the American Girl.”

Frishmuth recalls her first encounter with this creative spirit who was to inspire so much of her best work:

Desha was sent to me by Miss Frances Grimes, a sculptor whose work I admired. It was in 1916 that Desha knocked at my studio door in Sniffen Court and asked if I could use her. I liked her attitude right away but I didn't have time just then. I took her name and address and told her I would let her know when I could work her in. When we had finished our little chat she went out skipping, half dancing and singing through the courtyard to the street. That was the beginning of a very pleasant relationship between Desha and me. She posed for me for years and is the model in ninety percent of my more important work. At first I used her for my class of five or six pupils. Then one week I had her pose just for me and as neither of us knew exactly what we wanted I put a record on the victrola. It was *L'Extase* by Scriabin. Desha started dancing and one pose intrigued me. I carried it out and called the finished bronze *Extase* after the music.<sup>6</sup>

Although Frishmuth had studied and trained for years and had been earning her living as a professional sculptor before this meeting, she had yet to produce sculpture that showed any real originality. With Desha as her model, Frishmuth's art suddenly became filled with life and movement. Desha's lighthearted, spirited, and lyrical approach to dance touched a chord in the artist. Frishmuth must

5. Undated, unidentified newspaper clipping, Harriet Whitney Frishmuth Papers, Department of Special Collections, Syracuse University Library.

6. [Schmavonian], “Frishmuth,” 23.

have identified closely with the dancer, for the sculptures that Frishmuth produced with Desha as her model seem the products of a shared sensibility.

*Extase* is the remarkable result of their collaboration. Compared to *Saki: A Sundial*, mentioned earlier, *Extase* introduces dynamic movement. Desha stands on her toes, her back arched and her hands joined high above. Her head is thrown back and her eyes closed: she is absorbed in physical ecstasy. The muscles and tendons of her lean, superbly fit body are stretched to the limit. She is poised between movements, in a stance expressing powerful and triumphant sensuality.

The arched pose of the figure allows Frishmuth to emphasize contour, one of the aspects of sculpture stressed by her teacher Rodin. The front of the figure, which describes a long, bow-like line, contrasts with the undulating contour of the back.

*The Vine* (fig. 3), perhaps Frishmuth's best known and most successful sculpture, also emphasizes sweeping contours. Here Desha's exaggerated pose is even more dynamic than that of *Extase*. The dancer bends backwards in complete abandon. Her left arm is thrust out in front of her while her left hand delicately holds one end of a grapevine, which forms a twisting arc beside her. The tense muscles, articulated with great knowledge and authority, are clearly visible beneath the skin.

Frishmuth talked about the origin of the initial, small version of *The Vine*:

The small *Vine* originated in my studio in a class I had. There were six pupils and Desha took the pose for them. It intrigued me very much so I started modeling along with the girls. I thought it would be a good thing for them to see me working a little bit too! So as I worked along with them I said, "I'm going to put my figure up on her toes and then I'm going to bend her back further, get a little more action into it, and I think I'll put some grapevines in her hands because it's exactly the composition I've seen so many times passing the vineyards along the Hudson."<sup>7</sup>

7. [Schmavonian], "Frishmuth," 27.



Fig. 3. *The Vine* (1921).

The first small-scale version of *The Vine* was twelve and a half inches in height and proved tremendously popular with the public. In 1923 Frishmuth remodeled the sculpture at seven feet and two inches for an exhibition financed by Archer Milton Huntington, the wealthy philanthropist and scholar who later created Brookgreen Gardens, an extensive outdoor sculpture garden and nature preserve at Murrils Inlet, South Carolina.<sup>8</sup> Casts of this larger version were acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Cincinnati Art Museum, and the Frank H. McClung Museum at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

In addition to their esthetic qualities, *The Vine* and other Frishmuth sculptures from this period reflect an important moment in the history of dance in America—especially that approach to dance espoused by Michel Fokine. Frishmuth knew Fokine's work well, not only because she frequently employed his dancers as models, but also because she watched Fokine himself perform.<sup>9</sup> Although Fokine's choreography was grounded in classical ballet, he revolutionized this tradition by introducing freer and more spontaneous movements, especially of the upper body, which traditionally had been rigidly controlled by conventionalized movements. In a letter to the *London Times* written in 1914, Fokine expressed the fundamental ideas of his reform:

1. To create in each case a new form of movement corresponding to the subject matter, period and character of the music, instead of merely giving combinations of ready-made and established steps.
2. Dancing and mimetic gestures have no meaning in ballet unless they serve as an expression of dramatic action.
3. To admit the use of conventional gesture only when it is required by the style of the ballet, and in all other cases to replace the gesture of the hands by movements of the

8. Syracuse University Library's Department of Special Collections contains papers of Archer Milton Huntington and of his wife, the sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington.

9. Charles N. Aronson, *Sculptured Hyacinths* (New York: Vantage Press, 1973), 130.

whole body. Man can and should be expressive from head to foot.<sup>10</sup>

*Joy of the Waters* (fig. 1) is an excellent example of how Frishmuth exploited the expressive potential of the entire human figure. Here the dancer leaps into the air with irrepressible enthusiasm. Contrast *Joy of the Waters* with the staid and static ballet dancers of Degas. His paintings and sculptures show ballerinas conventionally posed, resting between performances, or practicing regimented exercise routines. The relationship of Frishmuth's work to that of Degas parallels the relationship of Fokine's work to traditional ballet. In both instances the human figure has been liberated from repressive convention.

Frishmuth's *Speed* (fig. 4) was directly inspired by the dance of Michel Fokine himself:

I was in a theater watching Michel Fokine dance. I was making a portrait of Fokine at the time. The big curtain was down and I saw this vision of a figure pass across the great screen and I could hardly wait to get back to the studio to model it. I made a sketch of it and then I got this very lovely English girl, Blanche Ostreham, to pose for it.<sup>11</sup>

One of Frishmuth's clients said of the work, "Your *Speed* represents better than anything else the culture and mode of America, its eagerness and its promise."<sup>12</sup>

Although atypical of Frishmuth's work as a whole, *Speed* is the work for which she is often recognized by mainstream American art history. Its Art Deco stylization makes it acceptable as a work of twentieth-century modernism.

While the female nude was Frishmuth's principal subject, she occasionally sculpted images of the male nude. *The Dancers* (fig. 5) was done at the suggestion of Leon Barte, a dancing partner of

10. Quoted in Walter Sorell, *The Dance Through the Ages* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Inc., 1967), 165.

11. Aronson, 130.

12. *Ibid.*, 130.



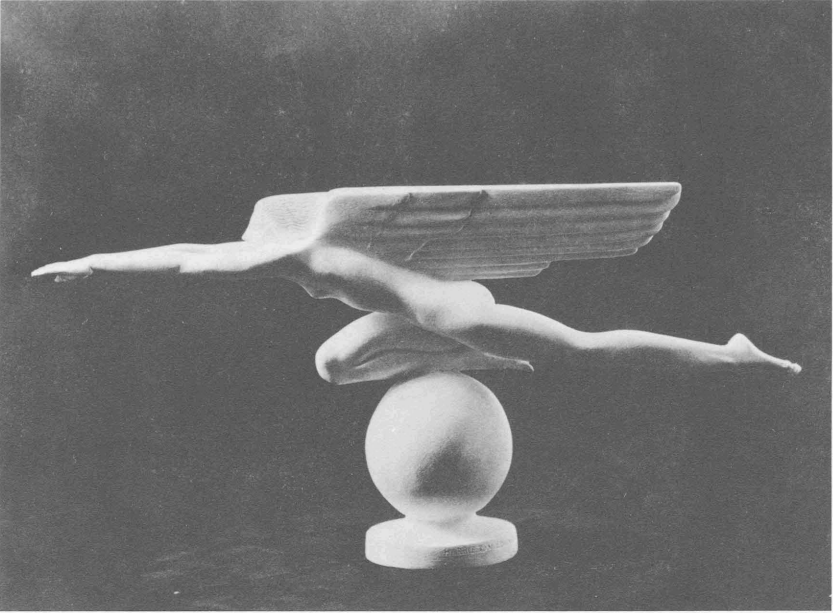


Fig. 4. *Speed* (1922).

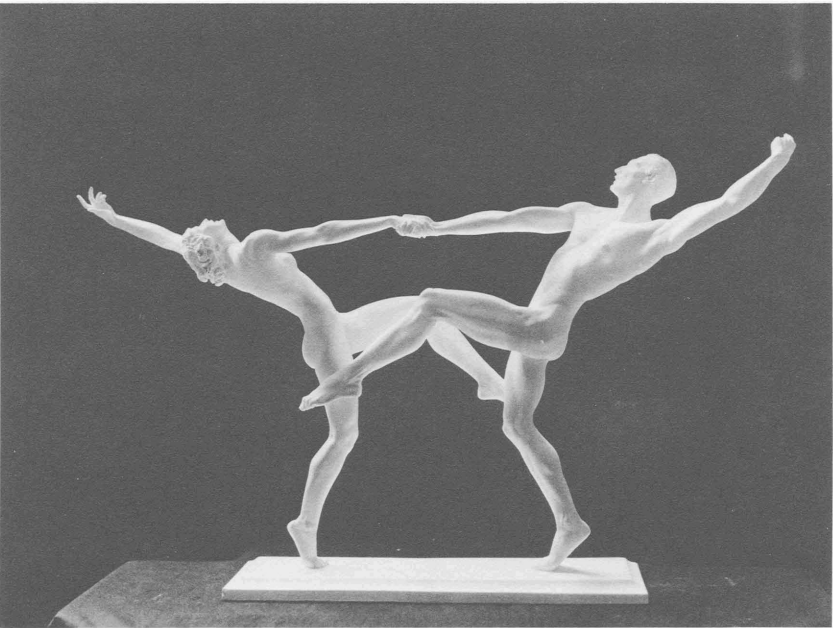


Fig. 5. *The Dancers* (1921).

Anna Pavlova. Desha and Barte eventually posed for the piece. In it Frishmuth has captured for the viewer a moment in which bacchic frenzy is controlled by two counterbalancing figures.

For years to come, Fokine's dance aesthetic as practiced by his dancers, especially Desha, continued to influence Frishmuth's best work, which embodies a fortuitous cross-fertilization of the arts of dance and sculpture.