

>> Janet Clemens: Imagine your greatest challenge in life is not the part where people continuously drought that your artwork is your own and insist that you prove it, but the simple fact that it's 1871 and you're a woman wearing pants.

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You're listening to Shaping History: Women in Capitol Art, produced by the Capitol Visitor Center. Our mission is to inform, involve, and inspire every visitor to the United States Capitol. I'm your host, Janet Clemens.

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In 1905, 15 years before the 19th amendment was ratified, Texas became the only state to have the same woman create both of their statues for the National Statuary Hall Collection. Elisabet Ney was a woman before her time, from her secret marriage and refusal to take her husband's last name to her practical clothing in support of women's dress reform, Elisabet Ney's life path was unusual. Immigrating to America in the early 1870s, she faced many of the same challenges as other women artists represented in the National Statuary Hall Collection. Struggling to obtain an education in art, balancing the expectations of marriage and motherhood with her own career goals, and striving to be taken seriously as a professional without being reduced to a mere object of fascinate. To discuss Ney's unique trajectory, I spoke with art historian Jacquelyn Delin McDonald. Jacquelyn, welcome to our podcast.

>> Jacquelyn Delin McDonald: Oh, thank you so much. I'm glad to be here.

>> Janet Clemens: So, you're an expert on Elisabet Ney. Can you take us just to the beginning, who is Elisabet Ney?

>> Jacquelyn Delin McDonald: So, Elisabet Ney, born in Munster, 1833. So, that's a mostly Catholic conservative region of what is now Germany. And then she was exposed to culture at an early age because her father was a stonecutter, but also a kind of sculptor as well of sorts. He did some statuary for a church, and then tombstones. Her early life and her choice to pursue a career in sculpture has been sensationalized in various texts. One story that's always interesting or entertaining to mention by her first biographer is that as a teen she decided she wanted to be a sculptor and went on a hunger strike until her parents agreed. And then a compromise was not reached until the local bishop intervened. So, a very dramatic intrepid young woman. Whatever the actual circumstances of that, she would move to Munich in the early 1850s and then began lessons in painting and then was officially admitted to the Munich School of Fine Arts as the first female sculpture student ever. And then she, of course, was admitted with conditions, as she was a female, so she had to be escorted to her courses, she couldn't be alone, she could not study from the nude, a key part of artistic study and practice. And then later she would study at the Berlin School of Sculpture under Christian Daniel Rauch. And while she wasn't the first female student to be admitted there, her admission to that program likely also required a lot of jumping through hoops and extra effort than of male applicants. So, she brought examples of her work from Munich. She also brought her letter of recommendation, her matriculation

paper, and still she had to execute another sculpture in front of a Senate member of the academy to prove her abilities, because they just couldn't believe a woman could do it.

>> Janet Clemens: Wow, a live audition.

>> Jacquelyn Delin McDonald: Yeah, can you imagine the pressure of that? So, it was a difficult journey for her to attend, be accepted. And then once admitted, I'm sure she was continually ostracized to a degree, and then didn't benefit from the school, opportunities available to the males. So, the news classes, and then also working from newscasting, probably one on one time with her teachers as well. So, for her to stand out despite all of those obstacles and things that basically heeded her progress is just a testament to how remarkable her talent is, or must have been. So

>> Janet Clemens: Yeah, and when I've been studying the American artists in the collection here at the Capitol, their, especially the early ones in the 19th Century, one of the big challenges all the artists are facing is that there's no art schools in America for them to attend, and they go to Europe to find those fine art schools. But we're seeing with Elisabet Ney that even though the schools are available, it's still, they're still facing these tremendous barriers to getting into them and getting accepted and then being treated like the other students.

>> Jacquelyn Delin McDonald: Yes, definitely that is the case. And when she first arrived to Munich, sculpture, it's such a, it was considered such a labor intensive and manly medium. So, as a female and as a female sculptor, she is kind of treated as an object of fascination. And what's interesting about that is other female sculptors also are treated in this way. So, it's interesting to think about how Ney [inaudible] her presentations, personality, and background in order to become a topic of interest, or an interesting figure to gain attention and to gain commission. And then other women sculptors did this as well. So, unfortunately, as women, appearance dictates perception of their work. It's just part of the game. So, many of them realize this. They had keen marketing abilities. And they would fashion an outward appearance to Garner interest. What's interesting is in almost every text concerning female sculptors Ney, [inaudible], Ream. Historians make note of the sculptor's body type, their height, and even their weight, as well as an objectified account of their facial features. But they became a wonder of beauty and creativity, almost like a presentation or a show to watch. The people would go to their studios. And then some use used their femininity to win commissions. Others downplayed it to try to make their efforts seem legitimate. They would simplify their dress, their hairstyle. And then some did not risk a non traditional appearance at all. Where and how Elisabet Ney compares in her outward appearance is difficult to typecast. She utilized her charming personality surely and her curiosity, her knowledge to market herself in the Berlin [inaudible] world. But she also set herself apart with a more masculine look with her trademark shorter hair, which was very uncommon for the time. And then later in life, she had developed quite a bizarre wardrobe in Texas.

>> Janet Clemens: Oh, let's talk about that, because I have, preparing for this, you know, I had asked you if we could count her among the suffragists. And I thought your answer was very interesting. So, what can you tell us about that?

>> Jacquelyn Delin McDonald: So, Ney did not really become actively involved with women's rights movements or wardrobe reform officially until the last decade of her life. This is indicated in a couple of ways. So, in 1892, she drafted a letter to Mrs. Francis B. Russell. She was serving as chairman of the dress committee for the Columbian World Exposition. I met quite recently lately your name and connection with the much needed dress reform. Since my youth, I have felt this need, have always acted independently. By the nature of my work, I found myself compelled to give up the trailing dress, which I admired for its grace. Through various stages, I came at last to a shaped form, which appeared to use convenient, protective, and handsome. I adopted and used it publicly, first in my travels in Egypt, and its varied materials according to weather, climate, and season work. So, dark flannel, white flannel, [inaudible], linen, black velvet. I, as an artist, consider it far more handsome. I always wear gators with it and work when it was very dusty or wet in traveling fashion with nicely made tan boots. I have never wished notoriety for it, as you believe noticing that anything has been said in public about it. Though I wore it daily for over 20 years now. When I wear the Algerian burmas, I know you feel truly interested and wish you would secure in your article an illustration of it. Let us make the movement a success. So, despite her broken English, what we can gather from this letter is Ney is realizing that this whole time she was, in a way, quietly protesting just by wearing what was practical. And the women's dress committee, headed by Ms. Russel, they actually only approved three to four dresses for women to wear in the Chicago World Fair in the heat of summer. So, what is so interesting for us today is this just seems so trivial, it reveals how important the issue of dress was for women at the time. Now, many women don't even have to think twice about what to wear, and comfort takes precedence over modesty. So, just by wearing what was practical, Ney was written about, and realized that she could perhaps have a say in the world's fair dress reform, or the dress committee. After that, several years later, Ney, along with several women activists in 1907, appeared at a hearing held by the Texas Constitutional Amendment Committee, and then it was in support of the cause for the enfranchise that implement. So, since January 21st, 1907. While the Joint Commission proposal was not adopted that day, the efforts of Ney and the various women there eventually would help the cause. And then what's unfortunate is women's right to vote was ultimately realized in 1918 in Texas, and then in the United States in 1920. So, unfortunately, Ney never lived to observe that right. But she was involved [inaudible], which is quite interesting. And she was a living example also of the freedoms that women should have as well. Many artists actually declared their dedication of their craft by never marrying, as if, you know, it's that, it's that tough choice. Do you want a career or children? So, if you had children or were married, you were seen as more domestic. And if you were working, then you weren't being a good mother. So, they had to choose this role and basically dedicate themselves and their lives to the role of being an artist. And then marrying a man basically is saying I give up on my, on my craft. So, and it would further label them and their work as feminine and invite unwanted opinions on their roles as wife and mother. So, Ney, in this case, believed that marriage is this objection which women are doomed to from their birth. So, she was aberrantly against it and would later get secretly married to avoid anyone knowing that she was married, so then that way she could still be seen as a professional and only in the role of a sculptor.

>> Janet Clemens: So, let's talk about how she went from Berlin to Texas.

>> Jacquelyn Delin McDonald: I think it has a lot to do with her ideas of what was available in the quote new world. So, having been involved in the Berlin art scene, the Munich art scene, traveling to Hanover, living in Rome for a brief period, she wanted a fresh start. She wanted to go to the unscathed, primordial, legendary new world. She considered herself definitely a cosmopolitan citizen of the world. And she hoped for a better life rooted in ideas that she could see proliferate in the United States. So, I wouldn't say hers is an immigrant story, like she's escaping persecution. I don't think she's a pioneer in that she's trying to find land or resettle. It's more that she's a pioneer in her forward thinking in the pursuits of utopian or ideal life, informed by the different philosophies and thinkers that she encountered in the intellectual world of Germany and Munich and Berlin. So, her choice to move here was unique. She was able to weigh the pros and cons. She wasn't in a dire situation. And I believe she did it because she believed it afforded more opportunities to her and her growing family, and ultimately her decision to relocate came with great sacrifice.

>> Janet Clemens: So, let's talk about the two statues that she made for Statuary Hall. Can you tell us who they are and describe them a little bit?

>> Jacquelyn Delin McDonald: So, the statues of Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin are both by Elisabet Ney and both represent the State of Texas. They were actually first designed for the Texas building at the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893. So, prior to the fair, a group of women formed a board in order to raise money and prepare for the upcoming huge world event in Chicago. At first, these women were very optimistic about their fundraising abilities. However, raising money for the building, let alone a very, the sculpture commission, to decorate the interior was proving bleak. Ney was involved with the board in that they consulted her for a decision of who to choose for the sculpture commission, but Ney began to realize the dire situation of the board's finances and offered pro bono to make the sculptures for the Texas building to represent the Lone Star state. I think this speaks to her kind of pride of being a Texan and her involvement in the community at the time. She also did these sculptures as a way to insert herself into the Texas art scene. And it was verbally promised for her to receive, after the fair, a commission to cut them into marble. So, she was hopeful for that as well. She wanted them to go into the Texas Capitol, so then that way her work could decorate her new home state. So, how do these designs get into the U.S. Capitol, right? So, only one actually was made in time to be shown at the World's Columbia Exhibition in [inaudible], and that was the Sam Houston statue. It did receive great reviews, and some claimed it could have even made it into the Fine Arts Building had it been there earlier. But the whole fair was just a rush to get things in. So, likewise, so was Ney's sculpture. Years later, the situation continued to be bleak in terms of the board's finances, and Ney was contacted by the Daughters of the Republic at Texas about financing and possibly gaining support for the completion of these statues in marble. Not only for the Texas State Capitol, but for the U.S. Capitol, so they began to lobby the different chapters in Texas. And finally in 1901, the Texas legislator approved for them to be made for the Texas Capitol and the U.S. Capitol. The only sculpture, though, that is paid for by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas is the Stephen F. Austin and the U.S. Capitol. So, technically, the U.S. Capitol has a donated piece from the state and from the Daughters of the Republic of Texas. And they made it and were installed in 1904.

>> Janet Clemens: Wow. Now, I've seen the statue, and you've seen the statue, and we're going to put up a photo for our listeners to look at. But what would you say about, about Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin's sculptures that Ney made?

>> Jacquelyn Delin McDonald: Okay, so what is most interesting about these sculptures, especially in regard to the Statuary Hall, is how different these marble works are in terms of their scale and their presentation. Even today, the figures of Austin and Houston, they seem much smaller than the other works. And this is because Ney preferred to work on an exactly life sized scale, and to portray her subjects truthfully. She learned this tactic as a student of Christian Daniel Rauch in Germany. And she would precisely measure and portray her sitters truthfully, yet still in a way that puffs up their legacy and aggrandizes them. So, her problem was with these was both of the sitters were deceased at the time, so she made sure to contact relatives, enthusiasts, scholars, to get any information to create a close likeness. She collected portraits and photographs, and then she learned that Sam Houston was 6 foot 2. Stephen F. Austin, 5 foot 7. So, especially Austin looks quite small in comparison to the mini monumental figures in the collection. Some did have issue with their size. But a propagated quote by the artists includes God makes men, I only copy his design. And she told other critics, take up your complaints with God. So, that was her method, and she stuck to it. So, another case of Ney persevering. So, she seems like a fun character to have known, for sure. And the sitters also differ not only in their size, but in their attire. So, in the collection, it's ever changing. As we know, states can switch out which figures they want to represent their state. But still the majority of the statues show the people and whether it's [inaudible] of the 18th Century or the 19th Century or the 20th Century. They're in more formal attire, shown as statesmen. These figures are shown in leather, clad in buckskin. And then they also are accompanied by Austin with the Kentucky long rifle and holding a map of Texas. And then Houston with his Sword of San Jacinto. And his hand resting on his chest as if he is about to address his [inaudible]. So, what Ney does here is inserts their distinctive contributions to the State of Texas, and then also, therefore, to the United States. So, Austin was an impresario and a frontiersman. Houston, a soldier and a statesman, an orator as well. So, what she's trying to do is really have them encapsulate their importance. And also during that key turning point where they joined and first came to the State of Texas. So, right around the mid 1830s. This is what they would have worn. And while they may not look like statesmen or politicians, they did great things on behalf of the State of Texas and the United States. And actually, Houston lived with the Cherokee Indians for many years and was an emissary for their tribe. So, he actually did go to Congress several times wearing a similar outfit, as he is depicted in in Statuary Hall. So, Ney's depiction of these figures is appropriate. It's just not expected.

>> Janet Clemens: They do stand out. They do look a bit different than the rest, with the scale, and as you said, with the attire. And then also Texas is unique in this regard, right, that they're the only state to have the same female artists make both statues for Statuary Hall. How would you, if you had to sum up her life, her legacy, in just a couple of sentences, how would you encapsulate Elisabet Ney and her contribution to the Capitol?

>> Jacquelyn Delin McDonald: It's definitely a unique fact about Ney that she is the only female artist to have two statues representing a single state. But it's also telling, right, because other states have statues made by the same male sculptor, but she's the only

female sculptor. How Ney managed to establish herself on two continents and yet somehow is not a well known artist is just a disservice to scholars, as the American art world benefits from her work and efforts to establish the importance of art in culture. As Ney once said in a speech, "art, when it reflects perfect beauty, is the climax of human achievement."

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>> Janet Clemens: Ney's statues of Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin were originally made for the 1893 World Columbian Exposition, commonly referred to as the World's Fair. And women's groups exerted an unprecedented amount of influence in their planning and preparations, up to and including recommending what types of clothes the female attendees should wear to the fair. Chicago artist Lorado Taft was put in charge of decorative sculpture for the exteriors of many of the buildings that were being rapidly erected. Known for mentoring both men and women, Taft checked with his boss about hiring female assistants to carry out some of the work. The response that he got was that he could find white rabbits to do it if they could get the work done on time. Helen Mears who made the first statue of a woman for the National Statuary Hall Collection was one of those white rabbits. And Frances Willard, who she sculpted, had included dress reform in the platform of her organization, the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Anne Whitney, Blanche Nevin, Vinnie Ream, and Elisabet Ney exhibited works of sculpture. And the busts that Adelaide Johnson made that would eventually become the Portrait Monument here at the Capitol were on display at the fair in the Woman's Building. In the next episode, we'll hear about the roles of Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in women eventually gaining access to the right to vote in the United States.

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