

>> Janet Clemens: Imagine being considered for a huge commission, with your qualifications being debated on the Senate floor. Your age, your experience, your talent are all being questioned. Now imagine your place is restricted to the balcony, observing silently while surrounded by press.

[Music]

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.

[Music]

There are multiple ways that statues are incorporated into the Capitol collection. In addition to the National Statuary Hall Collection, Congress can receive artworks as gifts, or they can commission specific works. Vinnie Ream was the first woman to receive one of these commissions, in 1866, and also has two statues in the National Statuary Hall Collection, making her the only woman to have three sculptures in the Capitol collection. While there were other women who forged paths in sculpture, Vinnie Ream stands apart. Inexperienced, ambitious, strategic, bewitching, an untutored genius, undoubtedly as gifted as she was attractive, a woman illustrious only in mind, not just famous, but notorious, these are a few of the phrases that were used to describe Vinnie Ream during her career. I spoke to Melissa Dabakis, Professor of Art History Emerita at Kenyon College, about this young celebrity sculptor. She's the author of a book, "A Sisterhood of Sculptors: American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome." Professor Dabakis, welcome to the podcast.

>> Melissa Dabakis: Thank you.

>> Janet Clemens: So we're going to talk today about Vinnie Ream. What can you tell us, just real briefly, who is Vinnie Ream?

>> Melissa Dabakis: Vinnie Ream was an American sculptor who worked in the 19th Century. And her, I think, biggest claim to fame is that she produced the first full-size sculpture of President Lincoln after Lincoln's assassination. It was installed, and it still is installed in the rotunda of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC, and it was unveiled in 1871.

>> Janet Clemens: Yeah, it's right there in the rotunda. So can you tell us where Vinnie Ream fits in with the white marmorean flock and what are some of the challenges that she faced?

>> Melissa Dabakis: Well, first of all, I must say, the term "white marmorean flock" is a difficult term. I mean, it was constructed by Henry James. So it has a rather sexist overtone. James was not a great fan of the women sculptors in Rome. And so, that term probably needs to be put in quotation marks, you know, in terms of what it means. But anyway, Vinnie Ream is, I argue, she was the last of a group of women sculptors who came to Rome and lived in Rome or certainly for their whole life. So became expats or visited for a fairly lengthy time period between 1850 and 1876. So that's the time period of my book and the

time period when most of these women were most productive in their careers. And it was really the only place that they could be successful as professional artists but also as professional sculptors because they had access to a number of resources that they didn't have access to in this country at all. So anyway, Vinnie Ream is the youngest of this group of women who spent time in Rome. So her experience is a little different than most of the other women. You know, for example, she was born literally the years that Sarah Fisher Ames was in Rome. So there's the generational differences. Harriet Horsburgh, who's another one of the major sculptors who worked and lived in Rome, came to Rome in 1852. And so, Vinnie Ream is five years old at that point. So one thing I think that happens with Vinnie is she is, I think, by all accounts, the most controversial of all these women, even though the other women certainly lived through a number of scandals. But as this kind of younger generation, she, I would argue, sort of profits from the kind of advances that these women made in Rome in the artistic sphere. And she's also a different generation of women. You know, she's born later. She's born into this moment of great reform across the country. Suffrage is one of those reforms and women's rights. And so, she is a very public woman and she is very successful in her career. And she's very much in the limelight, whereas women of an earlier generation tried to stay away from that for the most part because it tended to work against them. It tended to kind of sully their characters. Louisa Lander, Emma Stebbins, and Whitney all come from a moneyed background. They come from a privileged background. So their experiences were very different from someone like Vinnie Ream or Harriet Hosmer or Edmonia Lewis, who need to work and make money. They need to support themselves. So they have to work in the public sphere. They have to sell their work. They are involved in these financial transactions, many of which then become sexualized because they're women. And so, their public persona is very important and how you play that card. And Vinnie Ream is very interesting in the way she plays her public persona card because, at the time, the separate spheres ideology, the cult of true womanhood, this idea that women were morally pure, and they needed to remain morally pure in the private domain; you know, that once they ventured out into the public where men were, you know, the public sphere rather than the domestic sphere, their characters just automatically got sullied. And so, that's something that Vinnie Ream has to deal with a great deal because she's very much in the public eye in the United States. The women in Rome negotiated that public-private relationship in very complicated ways. Each one did the best they could to manage that. But Vinnie, being the youngest of this crowd, is much more brazen, you know, what we say now, and is part of a younger generation of women who feel like they are entitled to work in the public sphere and that they are entitled to have a professional career and they are entitled to make money. And Vinnie Ream supported her family. She had to make money to support her family. So these women, the experience of the women is very, very different and very unique, having to do with generation, having to do with class, having to do with race. Edmonia Lewis is African American and Native American. So there are a lot of differences among these women. And she spends maybe just a year in Rome, whereas others spent longer time there. She goes to Rome to actually have the Lincoln sculpture carved in marble.

>> Janet Clemens: What do you think drew her to this career path when she's younger than these other artists? They've already shown how difficult it is, and especially if she comes from a background that isn't wealthy. What do you think made her choose this path?

>> Melissa Dabakis: You know, I don't know. She says that, as a young child, she always was kind of drawn to sculpture and to modeling and clay and kind of playing with things. You know, she always kind of felt artistically inclined. She was a very talented woman. I mean, she was, first of all, very beautiful. And that worked to her advantage and disadvantage I suppose. She was a musician. She played the harp. She had a lovely voice. And then she became a sculptor. So she was very, I think, artistically inclined. And then when she gets to Washington, when her family moves to Washington DC, because she grows up in Wisconsin -- So she grows up on the American frontier. So there's very little possibility for kind of cultural enrichment there. So the family moves to Washington for other reasons. But she then apprentices, and it's 1864, in the Washington studio of Clark Mills. And at this point, she's like 17 years old. And so, she walked into that studio and she claimed this is it, this is what I want to do. And so, she becomes very inspired. And she's watching, she's looking. She's helping. And she's a very hard worker. I mean, from what I can tell and when she sets her mind to something, she does it. So she's working, but it's also very controversial. She's a 17-year-old in the studio of Clark Mills. She's working there very diligently, every day, unchaperoned. See, women did not go in public unchaperoned at that time. And so, and then she's in the Capitol building because that's where Clark Mills has his studio. And he knows, of course, the politicians and everybody in the building, you know, who would wander in and out of these studios, there were a number of sculptor studios in the Capitol because they had their portraits done. I mean, that was one of those things that if you were a politician, you would often have your bust done, you know, sort of like being photographed now. And so, these studios were visited all the time by senators, by members of Congress. And so, they were very aware of Vinnie Ream being there, and they were sort of watching her. And again, it was like what is this young girl doing by herself working in the studio. Well, she wants to be a sculptor. And so, this is what she does. And at that point, what really starts her career is that she's able to actually model, in clay, a bust of President Lincoln from life. And that was very unusual because Lincoln did not pose. He posed for photos. We have lots of photos of Lincoln, and he was very savvy the way he used to photograph. But he never -- Really, I don't think he sat for any bust of him. He didn't have the time, and he just didn't want to deal with it. But he was introduced to her. He liked her a lot. They both came from the Midwest or the frontier at that point. They felt like they had a lot in common. So she would set up. She actually, for five months, set up her pedestal and her play and her instruments and while Lincoln is working in the office. And, of course, at that point, there's not an Oval Office. This is just an office. And I think it's on the second floor of the White House. And all these people are coming in and out to see him. Access to the presidents were very different than to, you know, there'd be all these people lined up outside his office waiting to "lobby" him or asking for something or ask him for help. And so, people are in and out, in and out, and she's modeling his bust. And in the scholarship, it's always been debated whether this really happened or this was another one of these kind of fact or fiction. It's very hard to tear apart like what's exactly real in Vinnie Ream's life because she's so controversial. But I'm convinced that it really happened because, as critical as everybody was of her career or many people were of her career, no one ever came out and said she did not model this bust from life. You know, and I'm sure if she made this up and she didn't model, it would have come out as one of the many charges against her as being a fraud and a charlatan and all these things that were leveled at her. But no one ever accused her of that. And so, I feel fairly confident that she was able to work in

Lincoln's studio, which then, because she worked from life and had this bust of Lincoln, was one of the entrees was one of the ways she was able to get the major commission for this full-sized sculpture of Lincoln that now is in the Capitol rotunda.

>> Janet Clemens: Right. Yeah. Because it would have been remarkable enough that this artist is getting to sculpt the president from life and then he's assassinated. And then all of the sudden --

>> Melissa Dabakis: Right. Exactly.

>> Janet Clemens: So that kind of launches all this into being, right? Can we walk through the timeline of the Lincoln commission?

>> Melissa Dabakis: So even before the commission, right, she's in Washington. She's in Clark Mills studio. She's a well-known personality around town and as a sculptor. She carves or models this bust of Lincoln between December 1864 and April 1865. She has pictures of it taken. Again, this is what I mean about her public life. She has a carte de visite made up of both the bust and her standing with the bust. She distributes this. So she knows how to build a career. Again, it's controversial for women to do this, but she knew that she had to do this. And so, she has this bust. Of course, Lincoln is then assassinated. And then Sarah Fisher Ames, another one of the women who was in Rome briefly, was commissioned to do a bust of Lincoln. And she also was able to -- She didn't work from life. She worked from photographs of Lincoln, but she actually knew Lincoln. And the Senate purchases this stuff in 1866. And then that happens, and I think that's one of the things that spurs both the House and the Senate to commission a life-size sculpture of Lincoln as a memorial to him. And so, there were a number of sculptors, many from Europe, who wanted to compete with this. And then there was Vinnie Ream in Washington, in the Capitol building with her bust of Lincoln. And one of the other things she does, in 1866, is right after the commission is announced, right, that they want to have the sculptures, she has this petition signed by 178 very prominent men in Washington attesting to her "rare order of talent." So, again, this kind of lobbying, the fact that she gets around and the fact that she knows all of these men, of course, helps her career but tarnishes her reputation. So it's a very complicated, you know, relationship that she has with the public sphere. And so, in the House, in June of 1866, they know Vinnie Ream. They see this sculpture that she made of Lincoln. And they said, well, let's just vote to have her do the sculpture. And the House approves it. The Senate side, things are a little different. And the senators -- And, you know, I cannot blame the senators, particularly Senator Sumner, who led the charge. I don't think she should do it. She's too dumb. She's never done a full-size sculpture. She doesn't have the experience. And I think that's perfectly reasonable criticism of her. And then Sumner says, listen, we have great sculptors in Rome, William Wetmore Story being one of them, Harriet Hosmer being another one, but particularly Story. And he wants William Wetmore Story to do the sculpture. So he wants to kind of go to the professional artists in Rome. But then she has a lot of supporters in the Senate, and they love the bust. They think it's very true to life and it looks like Lincoln, which is very important to them at that time. And like Lincoln, she is a young woman from the frontier. There's this nativism that comes to play, you know, that she's a true American. We should have like a true American working in the United States do the sculpture. And so, this kind of debate goes back and forth between the senators about

this. And so, it breaks down to a kind of nativist argument versus the kind of effete cosmopolitan argument. And Sumner is on the effete cosmopolitan side rather than the kind of nativist Americanist side. So it moves from that debate to then the attacks becoming very personal, not about her as a sculptor or her sculpture, but about her character. And the debate kind of devolves. And this is where it's hard to know when you hear the stories of her sitting in the gallery, looking down at the senators or members of Congress who are debating this and the newspapers how she's winking and nodding and all this to these fellows down there. And it's hard to know what's true and what's not true, you know, if that actually happened or not because what we see here is, again, because she's such a public woman, this challenge to her character, this sexualizing of everything that she does. It's just hard to know exactly what happens at that moment and how much she was involved in this. I mean, she's accused of being a lobbyist. Now, men are lobbyists all the time. Men lobby, that is they ask for favors. They go, they meet with their senators and their representatives, and they're talking about that. And we know lobbyists still exist to this day. But it's a very gendered term. So she has to negotiate a very complicated, social milieu here, you know, in terms of professional sculptor versus a woman of ill repute. And so, that debate takes place on the floor of the Senate and it devolves into that, but she ends up getting the commission.

>> Janet Clemens: Right. And this happened in the Senate chamber, which is the chamber the Senate's still in today, the one they moved into in 1859, right?

>> Melissa Dabakis: Yeah.

>> Janet Clemens: So the senators are down there on the floor. They're at their desks, you know, standing up to address the group periodically, right. And she's just sitting up in the gallery, kind of a little balcony that runs around the room, right?

>> Melissa Dabakis: Right.

>> Janet Clemens: That the public are allowed into view.

>> Melissa Dabakis: Where the public's able to sit. I don't doubt that she was up there. But, you know, the winking and the flirting and the bedazzling dress, who knows what, you know, what all that means because it fits into the ideology. It's fit into this sort of construction of a woman of ill repute that is kind of building with her. So, immediately, this choice gets made and she's criticized. And she's often criticized by women, too. That's the thing, is that this young girl in this public domain then is being accused of being a fraud and a charlatan by women, as well as men, but she also has a lot of supporters. So she's a very kind of polarizing figure in that way. And then by February of 1868, on top of that, she gets embroiled in the impeachment proceedings of President Andrew Johnson. It's like it's amazing. You know, she's just in these places and she then becomes unwittingly, I would say, kind of involved in these impeachment proceedings. She claims she remained neutral. She did not take a political stand on the impeachment. But Senator Edmund Ross of Kansas cast the deciding vote rather to impeach or not impeach. And he's a friend of her father's. He had been living at their domicile on Capitol Hill since at least 1864. So he rented a room from them. And somehow Vinnie Ream gets charged with like bedazzling in some way Ross and sort of accuse her of changing his mind because he voted against impeachment. But

then what happens at that time is that, in June of 1868, to get back at her, they kick her out of her studio in the Capitol, where she's working on this sculpture. And so, that becomes a major problem for her. And, you know, she's able to kind of lobby her friends and other sculptors. And eventually, she's able to stay because the sculpture, you know, you can't move a huge sculpture like that, that you're in the middle of making without harming it. So she was able to stay, but that was another big controversy and scandal that she got involved in. So she completes the model, this life-size model in 1869, of the sculpture. And then she goes to Italy for about nine months or 10 months and has this sculpture carved in marble. And then it's brought back. And on January 25th, it's unveiled; 1871, it's unveiled in the Capitol building. And once again, there's a rash of criticism of her and of the work at that point. A lot of it very unfair. I mean, people talk about it who never even saw the sculpture. But she's a very controversial figure. And so, she has both very strong detractors and very strong supporters at this time. And, you know, what I find interesting about all this, and particularly with women's lives, that their lives, their moral character, their physical appearance take on much more importance than the actual work of art. So what she actually did with this sculpture, which I think is a quite good sculpture and a very interesting sculpture [inaudible], gets sort of lost in the scandal that's brewing. And so, no one really talks really about the sculpture. And I think this sculpture makes a very powerful political statement, which, again, got lost in all the noise. I give it a very radical reading at the time because what we see is Lincoln standing. He's on a pedestal and he's standing. And he's handing the Emancipation Proclamation, which is not unusual. I mean, this becomes the trope for Lincoln holding the Emancipation Proclamation. But he holds it and his eyes are looking down, his arm is down, and he is handing it to the viewer. It's like he's handing it to us, who are standing now in front of the sculpture. So, in some ways, the sculpture speaks very loudly to me about her politics, even though she's very hesitant to talk about politics because she doesn't want to offend anybody who might commission the sculpture from her. So she tries to stay neutral. But, I mean, I think her politics and her position are fairly radical at the time. And so, she happens to be in Washington. This sculpture gets produced all at this very, very important moment and particularly intersecting with the kind of suffrage and women's rights movement that's going on at the time. So she's kind of at the heart of all that.

>> Janet Clemens: Right. And she was working in her studio in the Capitol when Elizabeth Cady Stanton stopped by, right?

>> Melissa Dabakis: Yeah. You know, she's caught up, again, unwittingly, but as a public person, she's caught up in the debate among the suffragists at the time. So people like Stanton, people like Anthony are more radical. They hold a convention in DC at the time. This is when they go, at least Cady Stanton, goes to visit Vinnie Ream. They formed the National Woman Suffrage Association, where they wanted a constitutional amendment guaranteeing women's suffrage. So that's what they're asking Vinnie's support for. And she declines to sign the petition, you know, and complains about how she's been treated by women, that women have been very critical of her. And those are the women who believe in separate spheres and true womanhood, you know, who are a little bit more conservative on this side. And so, she doesn't sign it. But I think she'll sign it because she also doesn't want to be embroiled in the politics because she doesn't want to lose any commissions. So

historically, that all sort of comes together at this moment, and she becomes part of the debate, whether she wants to or not. And she becomes an example that's upheld by both women, either a negative example or a positive example, depending on which side of the debate you're on.

>> Janet Clemens: So after 1871, now she's got this incredible piece of publicity for herself, right, the statues in the rotunda of the US Capitol, a national showplace. What does Vinnie Ream do next?

>> Melissa Dabakis: She's, you know, very committed to her career. There's no doubt about that. In 1875, a few years later, she gets another major commission, the Farragut Memorial, which is in Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. And that sculpture's installed in 1880, unveiled in 1881. But that's her last major public monument until we get the Statuary Hall.

>> Janet Clemens: Right. Well, in between there, she got married, right?

>> Melissa Dabakis: Right. She meets her husband, Richard Leveridge Hoxie, while she's working on this sculpture because her studio is -- I forget where her studio is located. I think it was the Navy Yard where she had this big space where she was allowed to model the sculpture. And I think that's where she met her husband, who was in the military. They married in 1878. Now, Vinnie is 31 when she marries, which is old in the 19th Century to get married. I mean, it's interesting. I mean, she really was just committed to her professional career, but she marries him. She completes the model to the Farragut Memorial. They live in Dupont Circle. So they live in very nice address at Dupont Circle. And, you know, she marries now into a fairly wealthy, well-appointed Washington family. So her money problems pretty much go away, you know, at this point. And she takes on the role of a kind of socialite hostess. I mean, she does this wherever she goes. You know, she's used to this in her studios. People would come in and she would like have salons in there. But she'd have these salons at her house. People would come. And, you know, again, she's very smart, a very good conversationalist, and very talented. So her life takes on a different meaning, you know, now that she's married. And again, this sort of debate whether he was supportive of her work or not. And I tend to argue, from what I read, that he was supportive of her work and he didn't make her give up her career. Her son is born in 1883. So that's huge. She's 36. And she immediately starts to have health problems. So this is part of the decline that's happening. So her life takes a very different turn. And also, during this period, the '80s and through the turn of the century, her husband is now transferred all over the country. She does not want to leave Washington. She absolutely does not want to leave Washington. But she does, and she follows him. And so, for many years, really from 1884 to 1902, they lived all over the country. So it's very hard for her to kind of continue her career that way, too. But she never really loses that desire, you know? Nineteen hundred and two, they're back in Washington. And interestingly enough, that's when she starts working again, particularly with the Statuary Hall commissions. But she also has a lot of health problems. She has a chronic kidney ailment. Something happened at childbirth. So she suffered from that. She had inflammatory rheumatism in her hands. So that's hard. In 1905, she had a heart attack. So her health is not great. But she still lobbies to these sculptural commissions and she gets them. I mean, I was noticing that all the way back to 1868, when she's still working on the Lincoln sculpture, she's very interested in working in

the Statuary Hall. So that does not go by her. And in 1868, the state of Wisconsin commissioned her to do two sculptures, you know, for Statuary Hall. But they didn't have the money. So the commission never went through. So as early as the '60s, she sort of knows this would be a good idea for sculptors to kind of get involved in this. So later on, now, you know, here we are in the turn of the century. In 1907, she gets the commission from Iowa to do the bronze statue of Samuel J. Kirkwood. And he's an interesting character since, when he was senator, he voted against her getting the Lincoln.

>> Janet Clemens: Right. Their lives had intersected previously, right, when she's sitting there in the Senate gallery listening to the senators call her inexperienced and call attention to her youth. And then on the other side, some of the senators are saying, well, she's from the West, Lincoln's from the West. This makes sense, right. Kirkwood is one who sided with Charles Sumner and voted no, twice. They took two votes and he voted no both times.

>> Melissa Dabakis: Yeah. So that's all very interesting. I mean, as I've told you before, I have not done the primary research on the commissions. So, I mean, I don't have the nitty-gritty in terms of what's going on. I have these kinds of secondary sources and it's just a few primary sources. So I think these two commissions are very interesting. I mean, what may have happened is a close friend of the Hoxie's -- See, the Hoxies were from Iowa.

>> Janet Clemens: Okay.

>> Melissa Dabakis: So I think a close friend of the Hoxie's family got her in touch with Kirkwood's widow. And she asked Vinnie to execute the sculpture. So, I mean, again, this is a secondary source. I don't have the primary documents, but that's the closest I can come to exactly how she got that commission. And she accepted it. But she's sick now, too. And they open up. She has a studio built in the Dupont Circle rowhouse that they live in. And her husband seems very supportive. Her husband kind of rigs up this pulley system or something so that she can work on the sculpture because I think, from everything I could read at this point, she's fairly frail. But she's still working on a full-size sculpture, and he's helping her do it. She doesn't have the strength that she did when she worked on the Farragut Memorial, for example. So, but nonetheless, she completes the sculpture and it's installed in 1913 in Statuary Hall. And then in 1912, she is approached by the state of Oklahoma about doing the Sequoyah sculpture. And again, I haven't done the primary research on this. But the question is, how does she get these commissions? But supposedly she's approached in 1912. She accepts it, and she's working on this commission in 1914 when she dies. And she's 67 when she dies. So someone else have to finish the sculpture. They carved it. She completed the full-size model before she died. But then Julian Zolnay, another sculptor, cast in bronze, you know, had to kind of take it to completion at that point. So I think, like I said, a very hard worker, very committed to her career, even at the ending of her career when her health was not good and there were all these problems. She still tried to stay in this professional sphere.

>> Janet Clemens: Yeah. And that statue of Sequoyah is our first in the Statuary Hall Collection of a Native American. And then she's still the only woman sculptor to have three works in the Capitol, the Lincoln from the beginning of her career, right, arriving in 1871, and then these two for Statuary Hall after 1900. So how would we sum up her life, her

legacy just kind of briefly, if we had someone who never heard of her before, we had to tell them who's Vinnie Ream? What did she do?

>> Melissa Dabakis: I would say she was an important artist. And as you said, she has three sculptures in the Capitol building. So what I would like to do and why I wanted to write about her is to just kind of restore her presence into history because like with so many women artists, no matter how important they were at the time, in art history, they kind of fall out of the pages of art history. You know, they're no longer included in terms of the pantheon of great artists. And so, as a feminist art historian, one of the things I wanted to do was kind of recuperate her reputation and discuss all the problems. I'm not trying to whitewash the problems but discuss them and just at least position her back in history as this very interesting character.

[Music]

>> Janet Clemens: Vinnie Ream's last statue of Sequoya, completed in 1917 after her death, honored the first Native American and was given to the National Statuary Hall Collection by the state of Oklahoma. In our next episode, we'll look at two Native American women whose statues are in the National Statuary Hall Collection and explore the complex ways that their stories have been told across the centuries.

[Music]

Thank you for listening to Shaping History: Women in Capitol Art. For more information or to book a tour, please go to visitthecapitol.gov. The interviews included in this podcast represent the personal reflections and opinions of the interviewees and should not be considered as the official views or opinions of the US Capitol Visitor Center, the Architect of the Capitol, or members of Congress.

[Music]