THE ARTS AND MRS. BOTTA

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Although she was for over forty years one of the principal ornaments of the conservative intellectual and artistic circles of New York, her name, I dare say, now strikes only the faintest of chords, clearly heard only in the rarified atmosphere inhabited by literary antiquarians. They may recall her as a member of "the Starry Sisterhood," that elegant group of American poetesses of the mid-nineteenth century, whose tear-drenched doggerel moved Hawthorne, in one of his less inhibited moments, to call them "a damned mob of scribbling women." In those days, before her marriage to Vincenzo Botta in 1855, she was Miss Anne Charlotte Lynch, teacher, poet, and artist. Wherever she went her drawing room immediately became a lively gathering place for artists and poets. Here they always found hospitality, sympathetic encouragement, and oftentimes charity, dispensed with as free a hand as her limited circumstances would allow. Here they seemed to leave their petty bickerings behind them and appear at their best under her benign influence.

This charmingly vivacious and intellectual young woman is most frequently mentioned by literary historians for her kindnesses to poor, haunted Edgar Poe, who sometimes entertained her salon with a recitation of "The Raven." He included her in his critical sketches The Literati of New York, published in Godey's Lady's Book in the fall of 1846. Thus she is one of the very few American artists described by Poe, a curious honor she shares with the poet painter Christopher Cranch. In the past Miss Lynch has been of interest mainly for her literary friendships, and her activities as painter, sculptor, art collector, and friend of artists, have been ignored.

Poe's literary portrait of Anne Charlotte Lynch forms a nice complement to the miniature painting by Savinien Dubourjal shown here, painted about the same time:

"In character Miss Lynch is enthusiastic, chivalric, self-sacrificing, 'equal to any Fate', capable of even martyrdom in whatever should seem to her a holy cause—a most exemplary daughter. She has her hobbies, however, (of which a very indefinite idea of 'duty' is one) and is, of course, readily imposed upon by any artful person who perceives and takes advantage of this most amiable failing.

"In person she is rather above the usual height, somewhat slender, with dark hair and eyes—the whole countenance at times full of intelligent expression. Her demeanor is dignified, graceful, and noticeable for repose. She goes much into literary society."

For many years Dubourjal's miniature of Miss Lynch, his miniatures of Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, and a small marble bust of Henry Clay, all four of which are now in the Metropolitan Museum, formed part of the decoration of the parlor in which Miss Lynch entertained on Saturday evenings. Before these little works of art passed almost every poet, painter, sculptor, musician, and author who lived in or visited New York between 1846 and 1891. Among the quantities of visitors of note that crowded her salon were Emerson, Bryant, Irving, Matthew Arnold, Horace Greeley, George Bancroft, Henry Tuckerman, Fanny Osgood, Margaret Fuller, and Bayard Taylor—Walt Whitman and Herman Melville seem to have escaped her. Taylor, a constant guest, described her as a lady "whose tact, thorough refinement of character, and admirable culture, drew around her all that was best in letters and in the arts. In her salon... I heard books and pictures discussed with a calm and discriminating intelligence." Another visitor describes the charmed circle, saying, "When I entered I found two fair-sized drawing-rooms filled with guests in a high state of social enjoyment. There was music, dancing, recitation, and conversation. There were many artists in every department—painting, poetry, sculpture, and..."
music. There I saw for the first time that impersonation of genius Ole Bull (the Norwegian violinist). Even the histrionic art asserted its right to social equality in the person of one of its most honorable professors.”

At one of her soirées, a brilliant affair long remembered in artistic circles, a series of tableaux vivants were arranged by her friends the artists Felix Darley, Frederick E. Church, George Healy, Thomas Rossiter, John Kensett, Charles Elliott, and Thomas Hicks. Of this evening we are told “it can easily be imagined what aesthetic effects were produced by such an array of genius.”

When Miss Lynch’s volume of Poems was published in 1849 each poem was embellished with an illustrative engraving from designs drawn especially by her friends. “The Battle of Life” was illustrated by Peter Duggan, Professor of Drawing at the New York Free Academy, the young sculptor Henry Kirke Brown illustrated “The Angel of Death,” Felix Darley made the design for “Bones in the Desert” and “The Mediterranean,” Daniel Huntington for “Teaching the Scriptures,” and Thomas Rossiter drew the picture for “Byron among the Ruins of Greece.”

Anne Charlotte Lynch’s own career as an artist, beginning in her youth merely as the exercise of a polite female accomplishment—sketching in water colors—took a new direction after her first trip to Europe in 1853. While in Italy she became much interested in sculpture, an art so seldom attempted by women at that period that we may place Miss Lynch with Harriet Hosmer as a pioneer. Her interest in sculp-
ture lasted throughout her life, and eventually it almost superseded all others.

This important tour of Europe came about in a curious way. Anne Lynch, since her graduation from the Albany Female Academy in 1834 had devoted her energies to teaching and writing in order to support her aging mother, to whom she was very much attached. Her extraordinary sense of duty, remarked on by Poe, led her to spend “the season” in Washington in 1851 in order to present to Congress a claim asking payment for the service of her grandfather during the Revolutionary War—a sort of delayed pension. Her personal charm, a few well-chosen friends among the chivalry of the old South, particularly Henry Clay, and a shrewdly composed pamphlet distributed in the right quarters won for her a lump sum of “several thousand dollars.” As a memento of this happy occasion Mr. Clay presented her also with a small marble portrait bust of himself, the handiwork, most probably, of his protégé Joel Hart, “the Kentucky Michaelangelo.”

Returning to New York after this triumph Miss Lynch placed her funds in the hands of her friend Charles Butler, a noted lawyer, then president of Union Theological Seminary and also of New York University, who invested it for her in Western railroad stocks. The income from this carefully tended nest egg solved her financial problems, gave comfort to her dear old mother, and later enabled Mr. Botta to divide among his heirs an estate of more than $65,000.

Thus she was, in 1853, financially able to travel in Europe, chaperoned by Mr. and Mrs. Butler. Traveling with them, she doubtless met the leading American sculptors then living in Florence and Rome, and it is believed that she received some instruction in sculpture from one of them. At any rate on her return to this country she started to model portrait busts—one of the first, naturally enough, was that of her adviser, Mr. Charles Butler.

In that same year a handsome young Italian scholar, Vincenzo Botta, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Turin, appeared in New York on a mission for the Sardinian government. He came to write a report on the American educational system, but shortly after his introduction to Miss Lynch he decided to settle in New York, and in 1855 they were married. Botta was then appointed Professor of Italian Language and Literature at New York University, a position which he held for many years.

The Bottas set up housekeeping at 25 West 37 Street—in what Emerson called “the house of the expanding doors,” referring to the large and cosmopolitan group which there gathered about Mrs. Botta. “Who that has ever been there,” said a friend, “could forget those parlors on the second story, with their rich background of cabinets, well filled with choice books, covered with Venetian glass, mosaics, bronzes, statues (some of which were the work of Mrs. Botta’s own hands), and the walls hung with shields and rare pictures. . . .”

On the fourth floor a studio was arranged for Mrs. Botta, its walls covered “with all kinds of bas-reliefs, models, busts, statues, and the mantelpiece crowded with pictures, paintings, photographs. The middle of the room was generally occupied with whatever bit of sculpture she happened to be working at, which would be cast aside a dozen times, even when she had almost put the last touches to it, if she failed to embody the expression she strove to portray. If not gifted with special genius for any one of the fine arts, she certainly possessed a passionate love of abstract beauty for its own sake, and an ardent desire to express herself through several forms of art, as her paintings, sculptures, poems, and other writings show. . . . With the love and feeling of a true artist, but with a certain lack of confidence in herself, she worked unceasingly in her studio, devoting herself exclusively during the latter part of her life to modeling and sculpture. . . .”

Mrs. Botta herself said, “I enjoy the practice of this art of sculpture more than any other occupation; and if I could live in a studio for the rest of my days, engaged in it, I should be content.” “Beauty in art, in my opinion does not consist in simply copying nature, but in retaining the true features of the subject, and breathing on them a breath of the spiritual life, which should bring them up to their ideal form. . . .
The portrait should bring forth the ideal appearance of the subject. This idea I try to realize in my portrait busts.” In speaking of her work on one portrait she says, “I do not even walk any more since I began it. . . . I can do nothing but work on that bust. It is like being in love for the first time. I am absorbed; I forget everything else. If I have succeeded, I am enraptured; I need no food; I am filled with new wine. If I fail, I am utterly broken down; it is as if the beloved one were dead. . . . This work is something I have which cannot be taken away. Friends depart—we have no friends, but only befriending circumstances drawing one to another until change dissolves adhesion. Old age comes on, and the common life shrinks away from us; but art is an enchanted country where I can always lose myself. We cannot be exacting of Humanity, but of art we may demand everything.”

One of her friends wrote; “When a portrait bust of her modeling was lately sent to Rome to be put into marble, the foremost of Italian sculptors, not knowing its maker, declared that nothing would be beyond the reach of the artist if he would come to Rome and study technique for a year.”

Mrs. Botta would perhaps be better known as a sculptor if she had not given so much of her time to innumerable charitable works, to scholarly pursuits, like the compilation of a Handbook of Universal History (on which she was working at the time of her death), to active participation in establishing the legal rights of women, and to the Nineteenth Century Club and the Ladies’ Wednesday Afternoon Club. Obviously she never pressed her real talents up to the full professional level of development.

Among her sculptured works were portrait busts of Vincenzo Botta, Charles Butler, Henry W. Sage, Mrs. Andrew D. White, Miss Avis Leonowens, and the Honorable Lyulph Stanley. So far none of these works have been located and none of her paintings have been found. Mrs. Botta will, therefore, temporarily at least, have to be placed in an unusual category for an American artist—that of one whose works have entirely disappeared and are now known only through literature.

Though her position as sculptor and painter is somewhat equivocal, there can be no doubts regarding her genius in the important art of human relations. Her skill in forming and keeping countless friendships, with people of all kinds, is attested by a whole volume of tributes published after her death in 1891. Men and women not noticeably given to shallow flattery have remarked of her: “Anne Lynch is the best woman that God ever made” (Horace Greeley); “She was adorned with social tact, sympathy, and discernment, and her presence and influence helped to heighten in those around her the love of high thoughts and of useful studies” (Julia Ward Howe); “The tribute I pay to her memory is, that I am a better man because favored with her friendship for many long years” (Andrew Carnegie).

At one time Mr. and Mrs. Botta planned to bequeath a fund to New York University for the foundation of a chair in the Fine Arts, and their art collection was to be distributed between the National Academy of Design and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. However, just before his death Mr. Botta canceled these bequests. Possibly because he was an especial friend of General di Cesnola, then director of the Museum, and had been connected with the founding of the Museum, his heirs offered to give the Museum the four works of art he had designated in his will as a gift. In any case they were offered and accepted in 1895. Here they remain as a memorial to a remarkable figure in American social, artistic, and literary history.

Unfortunately Mrs. Botta refused to write her autobiography, and for information about her we depend on Memoirs of Anne C. L. Botta, Written by Her Friends, with Selections from Her Correspondence and from Her Writings in Prose and Poetry (New York, 1894).