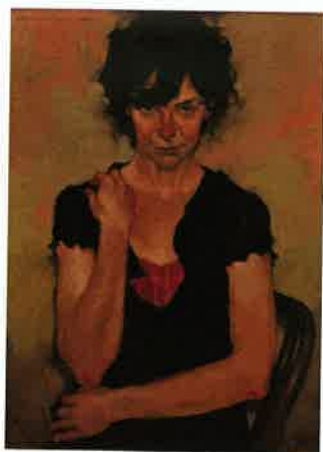


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HISTORIC
MASTERS

BY DANA PILSON

DANIEL CHESTER FRENCH'S LADY IN GREEN

Clad in a diaphanous green gown, with bits of lace at her elbows and a bow at her waist, a graceful young woman is engrossed in her book. Light plays upon her fashionably bobbed hair, and her pale skin is luminous against the dark brocade of the Renaissance-style chair on which she sits.

It may come as a surprise to learn that the sculptor of the iconic seated figure of Abraham Lincoln inside the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., was also a talented portrait painter. As a means of relaxation, Daniel Chester French (1850–1931) created portraits of his family and friends beneath the north-facing skylight in the reception room of his studio at Chesterwood, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. In *Memories of a Sculptor's Wife*, Mary French commented that her husband's "greatest amusement was to play at portrait painting ... he painted all the girls who came to visit us. He was quite wonderful at catching a likeness, which showed of course, his trained hand and eye in another line of work."¹

The young lady depicted here, Marjorie Lamond, was a close friend of French's daughter, Margaret, who was at the center of Stockbridge's lively social scene. Every year Margaret held a highly anticipated costume party in her father's studio. In August 1913, she and Marjorie cavorted around Chesterwood's grounds in their party outfits: Margaret was dressed as the goddess Diana and Marjorie as a bacchante. French took a multitude of photographs of the young women as they posed near the fountain and by the garden arch. Marjorie was a frequent visitor to Chesterwood, and at some point during the summer of 1913 she posed for this portrait in the studio reception room.

Marjorie was the daughter of Felix Lamond, who had been the organist and master of choristers at New York City's Trinity Chapel, where he had established a school of music. He was also the music critic for the *New York Herald*. In 1914, a year after French painted her por-

trait, Marjorie married Henry Fairfield Osborn, Jr., a conservationist who later became president of the New York Zoological Society. In 1915, Felix Lamond and his wife, Margaret, asked French to design the gardens at their Stockbridge summer estate, Fair Acres. French also designed for them an arbor and a neoclassical summer-house, which was embellished with flower garlands painted by Margaret French, who had studied at the New York School of Applied Design for Women and would eventually become known as a portrait sculptor.

A LONGSTANDING INTEREST

Back in the mid-1880s, French's career as a sculptor was well established. His first public commission, *The Minute Man* in Concord, Massachusetts (1874), had been a great success. Upon his return from study in Italy in 1876, French won numerous commissions for allegorical sculpture groups to adorn new institutional buildings. In 1883, he was asked to sculpt a figure of John Harvard for Harvard University. Unveiled the following year, the idealized portrait of the university's founder was well received: "If he never does another work, this immortalizes him," exclaimed the head of the foundry where the Harvard figure was cast.

In January 1885, French took an artistic diversion by starting painting lessons with the Ohio-born artist Joseph Rodefer DeCamp (1858–1923). A skilled portraitist, DeCamp had accompanied his teacher, Frank Duveneck, to study at Munich's Royal Academy. DeCamp had also spent time in Florence before returning to the U.S. in 1883, where he later found fame as a member of the "Boston School," a group of painters who specialized in images of women engaged in genteel pursuits such as reading, writing letters, playing music, and having tea within well-appointed, aesthetic interiors.

Excited about these first lessons, French wrote his father from Boston, "At last I am a painter! Mr. DeCamp ... started me in Monday afternoon



DANIEL CHESTER FRENCH (1850–1931), *Portrait of Marjorie Lamond*, 1913, oil on canvas, 23 1/2 x 19 1/2 in., Chesterwood, gift of the Daniel Chester French Foundation, NT 69.38.733

and I have been painting a girl's head every afternoon this week—from life. It is great fun and DeCamp is so good a painter that I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am going right. This is what I have wanted for a good while and as I could not go abroad, it is a good thing that abroad should come to me. DeCamp is fresh from the foreign schools.²² Three months later, French hoped that DeCamp would “spend part of the summer at Concord & continue painting.”²³ In 1890, French asked his brother, William M.R. French, director of the Art Institute of Chicago, if the institution was in need of a painting instructor. “If you are, I can recommend DeCamp as an excellent teacher,—he taught me to paint!”²⁴

Although in great demand as a sculptor, French would continue to paint portraits in his leisure time. In the summer of 1893, while visiting the Cornish artists' colony in New Hampshire, he dabbled in pastels, making portraits of his wife and daughter. Young Margaret proved to be a willing model, and French's portraits of her in oils and pastels document not only her growth from child to young woman, but also his increasing skills in both media.

After 1897, French spent almost every summer at Chesterwood, where he relaxed by painting portraits of family members, friends, and models. In 1911, he wrote to his close friend and former student, the sculptor Evelyn Beatrice Longman, “I have found time to get in quite a little painting and I can see that I am gaining on the thing quite fast. If I were twenty instead of sixty, I think I might make a portrait painter of myself. It is great fun.”²⁵

Chesterwood, the historic home, studio, and gardens of Daniel Chester French, is the main repository for French's oil paintings, and his pastel portraits are held at Williams College's Chapin Library in nearby Williamstown, Massachusetts. On view now in Chesterwood's Study Collection Gallery are two accomplished portraits of Margaret French, as well as French's masterful portrait of his niece Dorothy Schoonmaker. Please visit Chesterwood's website later this winter to enjoy a new online exhibition featuring French's portraits in oils and pastels. ●

Information: chesterwood.org

DANA PILSON is a curatorial researcher at Chesterwood and a frequent contributor to *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

Endnotes

- 1 Mary Adams French, *Memories of a Sculptor's Wife*, 1928, p. 246.
- 2 Daniel Chester French (DCF) to Henry Flagg French (HFF), 22 January 1885.
- 3 DCF to HFF, 19 March 1885.
- 4 DCF to William M.R. French, 14 March 1890.
- 5 DCF to Evelyn Beatrice Longman, 23 July 1911.