



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

MARGARET FOLEY (1827–1877)

*Trasteverina*

Marble, oval bas relief, 24 x 18 in.

Signed, dated, and inscribed (along figural truncation, at lower right): MARGARET. FOLEY. SC. ROMA  
1872

RECORDED: cf. George Titus Ferris, *Gems of the Centennial Exhibition ... at the Philadelphia International Exhibition of 1876* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, Publishers, 1877), p7

EX COLL.: private collection, until the present

Through the nineteenth century, Italy attracted an international group of sculptors dedicated to working in the Neo-Classical style in marble, in emulation of their forebears, the artists of ancient Greece and Rome. Inspired by the living presence of marble testimonies of long-ago glory, the sculptors enjoyed affordable living and a welcoming native population. Convivial communities of artists flourished in Florence and especially in Rome, sustained by a steady supply of travelers, European and Americans, who visited studios and commissioned works.

In 1861, Margaret Foley embarked on the well-trod path that led to Italy, the *sine qua non* of pursuing a serious career as a Neo-Classical sculptor. Foley was thirty-four years old, a reflection of the circuitous route that had finally brought her to the point of realizing her natural talent. She arrived in Rome in company with Charlotte Cushman, a Boston native, and Cushman's wife, Emma Stebbins, a Neo-Classical sculptor who hailed from New York City. The two had exchanged vows in Europe in 1859 (see Melissa Dabakis, *A Sisterhood of Sculptors: American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome* [University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014], pp. 34, 222. fn.111, 112). An artist in her own right as an internationally acclaimed Shakespearean actor, Cushman was the matriarch of the Roman female artist's community. She deliberately fashioned her comfortable home as the welcoming center, meeting place, and social salon of the American female artists' community. When Foley first arrived, she stayed with Cushman, was warmly greeted by Harriet Hosmer (1830–1908), already established as a sculptor in Rome, and was invited to share Stebbins' studio.

Rome was notable for the educational, social, and financial opportunity it offered to women determined to achieve careers in art. It was, for Foley and her circle of American women, the only place in the world that offered the opportunity to live and work as independent professional female artists. It was this group that Henry James memorably—and perhaps somewhat dismissively—described as “...that strange sisterhood of American ‘lady sculptors’ who at one time settled upon the seven hills [of Rome] in a white marmorean flock” (James, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends* [Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1903], as quoted on title page of *The White Marmorean Flock: Nineteenth Century American Women Neoclassical Sculptors*, exhib. cat.

[Poughkeepsie, New York: Vassar College Art Gallery, 1972]). James's sisterhood included Hosmer, Stebbins, Vinnie Ream, Anne Whitney, Edmonia Lewis, Louisa Lander, Sarah Fisher Clappitt Ames, and Margaret Foley. (See Dabakis, p. 2. Dabakis discusses Foley on pp. 87–90, with footnotes to contemporary nineteenth-century sources.)

Margaret Foley thrived in Rome. She enjoyed a successful career, was highly regarded by her fellow artists, both male and female, and received a series of positive notices in the contemporary art press. Surrounded by a devoted circle of friends, she worked diligently. Unlike some of her colleagues, Foley appears to have been disinclined to behavior that might have attracted wider public attention. She never entirely gave up the cameos and portrait medallions that undergirded her financial stability. Thus, much of her characteristic work was done for private patrons and remains in private hands, rarely appearing on the art market. From a young age, she suffered from unspecified chronic health issues which led to intermittent periods of convalescence. Her major American public commission, a marble fountain for the Horticultural Hall at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, was well received, but prospects for a more visible career were cut short by her early death in Europe in 1877 at the age of fifty. And finally, Foley left behind no descendants devoted to preserving her oeuvre and name. Foley thus remains among the lesser known of her compatriots. As Laura Prieto points out, Foley's spotless character also worked against her posthumous reputation: "After her death in 1877, Foley's admirers emphasized her character instead of her talent, and memorialized her as a womanly icon of purity rather than as a sculptor of genius" (Prieto, *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* p. 73 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001]).

The result of this historical obscurity means that some details of Foley's biography remain hazy. She was born in Vermont or New Hampshire, or maybe Canada. Her father was a farmhand or "an Irish gentleman of ancient and honorable descent," or, perhaps, both. (See Margaret Howitt, "A Memoir of the Sculptor Margaret F. Foley," *The Art Journal (London)*, new series, XVII [April 1878], pp. 101–103. Howitt was a good friend of Foley. Her reminiscence errs on the side of gentility.) At any rate, there was enough money in the Foley family for Margaret to attend school. She lived in Vergennes, Vermont, where her talent as a student led directly to a teaching position. As with other artists, Foley's gifts were apparent from her earliest days. She whittled and carved and attracted the notice of admiring locals. The difference for Foley, of course, is that she was female, and the options open to her for pursuing a career as an artist were therefore severely constricted. Despite being a beloved teacher, by all accounts, Foley determined that she would have to leave Vermont in order to be an artist. She went to Lowell, Massachusetts, where she took a position working in a textile mill, which gave her the opportunity to hone her skills and earn a living in relative proximity to the cultural center of Boston. (Howitt glosses over Foley's stint as a factory worker. See instead Eleanor Tufts, "Margaret Foley's Metamorphosis: A Merrimack 'Female Operative' in Neo-Classical Rome," *Arts Magazine* [January 1982], pp. 88–95.)

The account of Foley's life between the time she left Vermont and 1857, when she was listed in the Boston City Directory and described as a sculptor (Gertrude S. Cole, "Some American Cameo Portraitists," *Antiques* [September 1946], p. 170), can be patched together from a variety of sources. Howitt claims that Foley saw her first cameo while she was still living in Vergennes. Deciding that she could cut cameos if only she knew how, she sought out a cameo maker in Boston for instruction, Foley enjoyed early success with her cameos. Tufts, citing private correspondence between Foley

and friends in Vergennes, documents that Foley was sculpting miniature profile medallions by 1848 (p. 90) and had already moved from Lowell to Boston to work as a cameo cutter. Nineteen plaster medallions by Foley, a gift from the artist to a hometown friend, remain in the collection of the Bixby Memorial Library in Vergennes, Vermont. What emerges is a picture of a woman doing whatever looked most promising as a means to her end. She worked in the mills. She studied and taught art. She appears to have lived in Boston for a while and then returned to Lowell where there was more opportunity to earn and, with a lower cost of living, save money. She may have returned briefly to full-time school teaching. She contributed poetry to a magazine issued by female workers in the mills, *The New England Offering*. In 1859, E[lizabeth]. F. Ellet, described Foley as “a member of the New England School of Design [who] gave instruction in drawing and painting. She resided in Lowell, and was frequently applied to for her cameos, which she cut beautifully” ([New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859], p. 287). In 1898, Harriet Robinson published a biographical sketch of Foley in *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls* ([New York and Boston: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company], pp. 150–54). It was her skill at making cameo likenesses, working in shell and lava, that finally gained Foley sufficient income to support herself as an artist. In 1860, she exhibited cameos at the Boston Athenaeum. But Foley’s ambition extended beyond cameo cutting. In 1859 and 1860, she contributed articles to *The Crayon*, a highly respected art journal. By 1861, encouraged by Boston friends, she took her carefully gathered \$400 in savings and headed to Italy.

The personal qualities that enabled Margaret Foley to transform herself from a small-town New England school teacher to a Boston sculptor proved equally effective in Rome. As Foley set about establishing herself, she continued to produce cameos and medallions for a succession of patrons who prized her work. Through her friendship with Harriet Hosmer, she met John Gibson (1790–

1866), the eminent Welsh Neo-Classical sculptor resident in Rome, who had earlier mentored Hosmer. Gibson was a member of the Royal Academy in London and had initially been a protégé of the famous Neo-Classical Italian sculptor, Antonio Canova (1757–1822). The senior artist was immediately impressed with Foley’s work and offered her encouragement and guidance. (It is unclear whether Foley formally “studied” with Gibson.) In the course of her Roman career, Foley carefully positioned herself to be able to produce ideal pieces as well as portraits. Soon after arriving in Rome, she sculpted a marble version of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, which she sold to J. T. Furness, a prominent Philadelphia merchant. (Foley appears to have sculpted Jeremiah both as a bas-relief and as a large portrait bust, both unlocated.) From her vantage point in Rome, Foley managed an active schedule of international exhibitions, sending marble busts and bas-reliefs to London, Dublin, and Paris, as well as New York City and Philadelphia. In 1864, a generically titled “Portrait of a Lady,” was shown at the annual exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

Foley traveled home in 1865 and rented a studio in Boston where she took likenesses of such well-known sitters as Senator Charles Sumner, the poet William Wadsworth Longfellow, and editor and poet William Cullen Bryant. She exhibited her work in New York and put her models into marble in Rome. Foley’s *Jeremiah*, owned by Furness, was displayed at the Pennsylvania Academy in 1866 and 1868–70. In 1869 and 1871, Foley sent works in marble to the annual exhibitions of the National Academy of Design in New York. According to Margaret Howitt, Foley had sketched out a design for an ambitious fountain as early as 1862, and, over the years, worked separately on its constituent figures. In 1870, the fountain was prepared to be cast in bronze, commissioned by a group of Chicago citizens. That plan was thwarted by the great Chicago fire. Foley proceeded with

the fountain in marble, and, in 1874 the design was selected by “the Commissioners of the American Centennial Exhibition of 1876 at Philadelphia, to occupy the center of the Horticultural Hall” (Howitt, p, 102).

Foley was proud of her fountain and proud, too, that it had been accepted on its own merits. She is quoted in *The Rutland Globe* saying of the fountain, that “the most envious part of it all is, that it was done without any wirepulling on the part of my friends or myself; I had no more idea of sending it to the U.S.A. than I had of flying” (February 24, 1876, p. 2). It is not hard to imagine that Foley’s comment here had reference to Emma Stebbins’ monumental *Angel of the Waters* (1868–73), the fountain sculpture at Bethesda Terrace in New York’s Central Park. Stebbins’ brother, Henry was a member of the Central Park Commission, and wagging tongues at the time (and since) credited him with steering the commission to his sister. Further distancing herself from popular criticism of female sculptors, Foley made a point of the fact that she did her own stonecarving, inviting visitors to her studio to observe her at work. This followed in the wake of criticism of Harriet Hosmer for employing male assistants to carve her marbles, standard practice among American male Neo-Classical sculptors,

By 1872, Margaret Foley owned her own home and had, addition, two studios in Rome, one for sculpting, the other for exhibition. While Foley continued to be a favorite with Americans visiting Italy, she also developed an audience of appreciative English patrons. There were close ties between the American and English art and literary communities in Rome. Harriet Hosmer famously sculpted the intertwined hands of her friends, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1853). Foley developed a filial relationship with a married couple, the

English literary expatriates, William and Mary Howitt. The Howitts, a generation older, were prolific authors (over 180 publications) who had a wealth of connections to the English literary and art world, a number of whom became Foley patrons. It was Margaret Howitt (1839–1930), their youngest child, who eulogized Foley in the pages of *The Art Journal* in 1878. As Foley's bouts of ill health, chronic since her days in Boston, increased after 1870, she spent summers with the Howitts in the resort area of the Austrian Tyrol (since the end of World War I, the South Tyrol, Italy). Foley died there in 1877 in the village of Meran (now Merano) and is buried in the Protestant Cemetery.

Margaret Foley was much appreciated during her lifetime. In 1880, the city of Philadelphia purchased Foley's fountain sculpture for the substantial sum of \$10,000. It remains today in Fairmount Park. Foley's name appeared frequently and respectfully in notes in American journals and newspapers reporting on the expatriate art colony in Rome. Henry Tuckerman lauded Foley in extravagant terms, writing that "her head ... [of Senator Sumner] is unsurpassable and beyond praise. It is simple, absolute truth embodied in marble. Not truth in outline and feature alone, but in expression and sentiment" (*Book of the Artists: American Artist Life* [New York: G. P. Putnam & Son, 1867], p. 603). Tuckerman also made reference to a major project in the works, doubtless what turned out to be the Philadelphia fountain, which he predicted "would place her in a firm position in the higher ranks of the art to which she is devoted." An American visitor to Foley's studio in 1874 recorded this description:

In personal appearance she was very attractive. Of a medium-sized, lithe figure, with small, unusually strong hands, a high, broad forehead, which, in connection with her refined features, gave her the stamp of intellectual power, a luxuriant quantity of soft brown hair, the longest and thickest I ever saw, merry blue eyes, an a head as classic and a skin as white as her own beautiful marbles. (Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls* [New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, 1898], p. 153).



Mary Howitt described her as a “gifted, generous-hearted New England sculptress,” a “born carpenter,” who delighted in carving and whittling even when she was convalescent (as quoted by Robinson, p. 152, from Howitt’s *Autobiography* published after her death by her daughter, Margaret).

Today Foley’s name can be found, with a brief biographical note, in a variety of art dictionaries and inventories. Historically, however, she has been overlooked or lumped together with a sub-group of artists identified by their female gender. There is rich historical irony here. In the present climate of championing diversity, she is getting a second look. But again, it is not what she deserves. Foley was not a female artist. She was an artist, and the most respectful examination would evaluate her on those terms, using the same criteria as are applied to her male contemporaries, Thomas Crawford, Thomas Ball, William Wetmore Story, and their cohort.

While Foley regularly inscribed her work with her name and a date, she did not commonly include the title of the piece with her ideal compositions. The present work has been identified as an 1872 version of the ideal bas-relief that Foley entitled *Trasteverina*. Foley exhibited *Trasteverina* in 1869 at the National Academy of Design in New York (recorded in the exhibition records with the garbled spelling “Trasteveima”). The composition was one of eight Foley bas-reliefs exhibited in Boston posthumously at the 1881 Exhibition of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association. *Trasteverina* is also one on a short list of works frequently mentioned in brief descriptions of Foley’s career.

Trastevere is an old neighborhood of Rome on the west side of the Tiber River. Originally the site of an Etruscan settlement, the area was conquered by Rome and named Trastevere derived from “trans Tiberum,” literally, “across the river.” Incorporated into the city since the reign of Augustus (27 B.C.–14 A.D.), Trastevere was included inside the city wall built to repel the invasion of German tribes during the reign of Aurelien (270–275 A.D.). During the middle ages, the neighborhood developed the narrow and winding streets that still characterize it today. Trastevere is noted for the ivy and flowers cascading from window boxes and covering the walls of its old houses. Foley’s bas-relief of a classical beauty in profile wears a garland of ivy leaves circling her around her bare shoulders and punctuated with a flower at her breast. Absent any photographs, illustrations, or contemporary descriptions that would firmly identify this relief as Foley’s *Trasteverina*, the botanical iconography has been the basis for the identification of this subject.

*Trasteverina* was specifically mentioned near the very beginning of George Titus Ferris’s encyclopedic review of the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. Ferris, illustrating Foley’s fountain in the Horticultural Hall, described the sculptor as having “gained a wide-spread reputation for medallion portraits, and for several very beautiful ideals bass-relief [sic], of which ‘Undine’ and the ‘Girl of Trastevere’ are among the most admired” (p. 7).