

Harriet Ketcham, Resolute Artist

by Louise Rosenfield Noun



Harriet Ketcham of Mt. Pleasant reached the height of her artistic career in 1889 when she won first prize in a design competition for a Civil War memorial to be placed on the grounds of the Iowa State Capitol. How was a woman living in a small Iowa community able to attain such success and how had she been able to develop her artistic skills? News stories written about Ketcham during her life and at the time of her death in 1890 reveal a woman determined to pursue an artistic career despite family responsibilities, a lack of encouragement from her friends, and little opportunity for adequate training.

Harriet McDivitt Ketcham was born in New Market, Ohio, in 1846. Her mother had come from Ireland but her father was American by birth. The McDivitt family moved to Mt. Pleasant in 1851. All we know of Harriet's schooling is that she attended Iowa Wesleyan College for a short time but left school when she became engaged to William B. Ketcham of Mt. Pleasant. The couple was married on August 27, 1868, when Harriet was twenty-two and William thirty-three.

William Ketcham was one of eleven children whose parents had moved from New York State to Henry County, Iowa, in 1855. Ten years later his family settled in Mt. Pleasant. William Ketcham's brother, Frank, married Harriet's sister, Mary Jane McDivitt. The two brothers owned a large grain elevator and flour mill in Mt. Pleasant as well as coal mines in Mendota, Missouri. They were also the chief suppliers of timber for construction of the Burlington Railroad across southern Iowa in the 1860s and were said to have cleared off most of the timber from Henry County as well as from areas in the western part of the state and in northern Missouri.

The Ketchams had three children. A son, Albert, was born in 1869 and another son, Ernest, was born in 1873. Fourteen years later,

when Harriet was past forty, she gave birth to a daughter, Roma Beatrice. Harriet Ketcham was an animated, dark-complexioned woman, highly nervous in temperament. At times she was even incapacitated by a condition known as nervous prostration. The Ketchams lived in a substantial Victorian-style home on the corner of Walnut and East Washington streets in Mt. Pleasant. One room of the house was given over to a workshop for Harriet and a small barn on the back of the property also served as a studio. Several pieces of furniture in the house were evidence of Ketcham's love of handicraft. A secretary, a bookcase, and a cabinet were embellished with her carving and the plush bands on the draperies in the parlor were decorated with hand-painted designs. The house also served as a gallery for Ketcham's paintings and sculptures.

Ketcham, like other middle- and upper-class women in the nineteenth century, was trapped in a family situation where femininity was to be realized exclusively in homemaking and child rearing. Home decoration and dilettante artistic efforts were admired but ambitions of a career as a professional artist were considered out of the question for a wife and mother. Unmarried women were less hampered by social constraints as long as they led exemplary and celibate lives. Ketcham, despite social pressures, was resolute in her determination to be an artist. She managed for brief periods to escape the confines of Mt. Pleasant in a search for instruction and wider opportunities to pursue her career but most of her life she worked alone at home, learning by trial and error.

Harriet Ketcham began by painting fruit and flower still lifes but within a few years she decided that she wanted to be a sculptor. Although she liked to paint and continued to do so throughout her life, she believed that sculpture was a higher form of art. This belief in the superiority of sculpture was in tune with current attitudes toward art. Longfellow in his

poem, *Michel Angelo*, called sculpture "the most majestic of the three sister arts . . . to whom all others are but the handmaids and servitors, being but imitation, not creation."

During the nineteenth century there were several American women working as sculptors who were probably role models for Ketcham. Among the most prominent were Emma Stebbins (1815-1882) who started as a painter and later became a sculptor, Harriet Hosmer (1820-1908) who was one of the best known sculptors of her generation, and Vinnie Ream (1847-1914) who received a commission from Congress for a figure of Abraham Lincoln while still in her teens. (When she was thirty, Vinnie Ream married Lieutenant Richard Hoxie, a native of Iowa City, and gave up sculpture in deference to her husband's wishes.)

While painting was considered an acceptable avocation for a woman of her time, the idea of being a sculptor seemed preposterous to Ketcham's friends. She was determined, however, to show them that she could succeed. For her first venture she copied a small bust of Shakespeare purchased at a local bookstore. Ketcham's brother helped her find some clay which she tried carving with a penknife. When this tool proved unsatisfactory she finished the piece with a hairpin. Her friends, she said, ceased to scoff when they saw how well she had done. Ketcham did not comment on the attitude of her husband or other close relatives but one may assume that they looked on her artistic endeavors in much the same light as her friends. Her husband, however, must eventually have become convinced of her artistic ability because he later financed trips to New York, Washington, and Europe, so she could pursue her artistic studies.

Ketcham's second sculptural project was a figure of St. Cecilia. She had difficulty finding suitable clay for this work and after many disastrous experiments she decided that she would try to make her own. With the help of a servant she gathered several barrels of clay from a

riverbed. She diluted this material to the consistency of cream and then ran it through a series of sieves to rid it of all sediment. It was then left in the barrels until all the water had seeped through the staves leaving the clay ready for use. Ketcham found this material very satisfactory. Ketcham also faced difficulties in casting the St. Cecilia. She had no one in Mt. Pleasant to turn to for help so she arranged for an artist to come from Chicago to teach her. Subsequently Ketcham did her own casting which she found extremely heavy and tiring work. She found, however, that the physical disadvantages she faced in getting materials and doing her own casting were nothing compared to the mental discouragement with which she had to contend. Every one of her friends, she told a *Des Moines Register* reporter in 1886, had to be won over and were it not for her determination she would have given up long ago.

By the summer of 1876 Ketcham must also have convinced her husband that she had sufficient artistic ability to be permitted to go to New York to study. As there were no art schools at this time she hoped to find a sculptor in whose studio she could work. But since only male artists maintained studios in New York, and since they were not inclined to admit women students, she had a difficult time finding an instructor. Ketcham was under the impression that these men resented Vinnie Ream's success and didn't want any more competition from women. Finally, through a friend who was head of the Woman's Medical College in New York (probably Emily Blackwell), Ketcham found a place in the studio of James Wilson MacDonald (1824-1908), a sculptor known for his portrait busts and his Civil War monuments. Albert TenEyck Gardner of the Metropolitan Museum has described his work as "monotonously realistic and lifeless." Nonetheless, MacDonald was well respected in his time. Ketcham found him greatly prejudiced against women but by summer's end he

showed respect for her ability.

When she was in the East during the summer of 1876 Ketcham also visited the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia where she made copies of some of the works which were on exhibition there. Among the women sculptors represented at this exposition were Edmonia Lewis, Vinnie Ream, Margaret Foley, Florence Freeman, and Anne Whitney. These women must have reinforced Ketcham's determination to succeed in her chosen field. However, before the summer was over Ketcham — overcome by fatigue and the heat — became ill and was forced to return home.

Ketcham was not satisfied to continue her work alone in Mt. Pleasant. She set her sights on Europe — especially Rome — the mecca for American sculptors to study and work. While she was making plans for a European trip she was persuaded by "friends" (could have been family?) to stay in the United States where her originality would not be inhibited by foreign instruction. As an alternative Ketcham went to Washington, D.C., sometime prior to 1886, where she rented a studio and found instruction from Clark Mills (1815-1903), an architectural plasterer turned sculptor. Mills is best known for having modeled a equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson by the lost-wax process the first large bronze sculpture made in the United States. This was an equestrian statue of Andrew Jackson which today stands in Lafayette Park opposite the White House. Mills also developed a relatively painless way of making masks of living persons which Ketcham learned from him. Like other sculptors of her time she used these masks as the basis for portrait busts. One of the busts she made in Washington was of Judge Samuel Freeman Miller of Iowa, a personal friend who had been appointed to the United States Supreme Court by President Lincoln. This bust at one time was displayed in the Supreme Court chambers. While in Washington Ketcham also copied a

painting in the Corcoran Gallery of Art depicting the French patriot, Charlotte Corday. A reporter for the *Burlington Hawkeye* admired the copy for the faithfulness with which Ketcham depicted the tear-stained face.

During her career Ketcham made portrait busts of a number of distinguished Iowa men including Judge George F. Wright, Colonel John Scott, Governor Samuel Kirkwood, Senator William B. Allison, and Senator James Harlan. In addition, Ketcham modeled busts of historical and mythological characters as varied as Abraham Lincoln, Horace Greeley, St. Jerome and Laocoon. She made full-figure statues of Venus, Sappho, and John Wesley as well as portrait medallions of family and friends, including a likeness of President Wheeler of Iowa Wesleyan College. Busts of her mother, sisters, and her children adorned her home.

In April 1886, Ketcham visited Des Moines hoping to persuade the legislature to commission her to make busts of Iowa Civil War heroes to be placed in the vacant alcoves in the rotunda of the newly completed state capitol. She offered to donate her time and talent to make one such bust if the state would pay for the materials and incidental expenses. There is no record of the legislature having accepted this offer. Civil War regimental flags instead of sculptures were placed in the alcoves.

None of Ketcham's portrait busts have been located. They probably have not been preserved because they were cast in plaster, an easily damaged and non-prestigious material. Ketcham would not have had access to a foundry where her works could be cast in bronze, and in addition, marble, not bronze, was the preferred medium for sculpture in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was considered the height of Victorian elegance to display in one's parlor a marble statue or bust executed in the neoclassical style.

Ketcham was well aware that her sculpture was not highly regarded because of the ma-

terial she was forced to use. "The general idea is that art is all in the marble," she told a *Register* reporter during her trip to Des Moines in 1886, "but the fact is that the modern sculptor calls to his assistance an army of cutters who do the most of his work upon the marble, while he only puts on the finishing touches." Ketcham contended that the artist's genius is best displayed in the plaster cast where the artist's handling of the clay is more directly expressed.

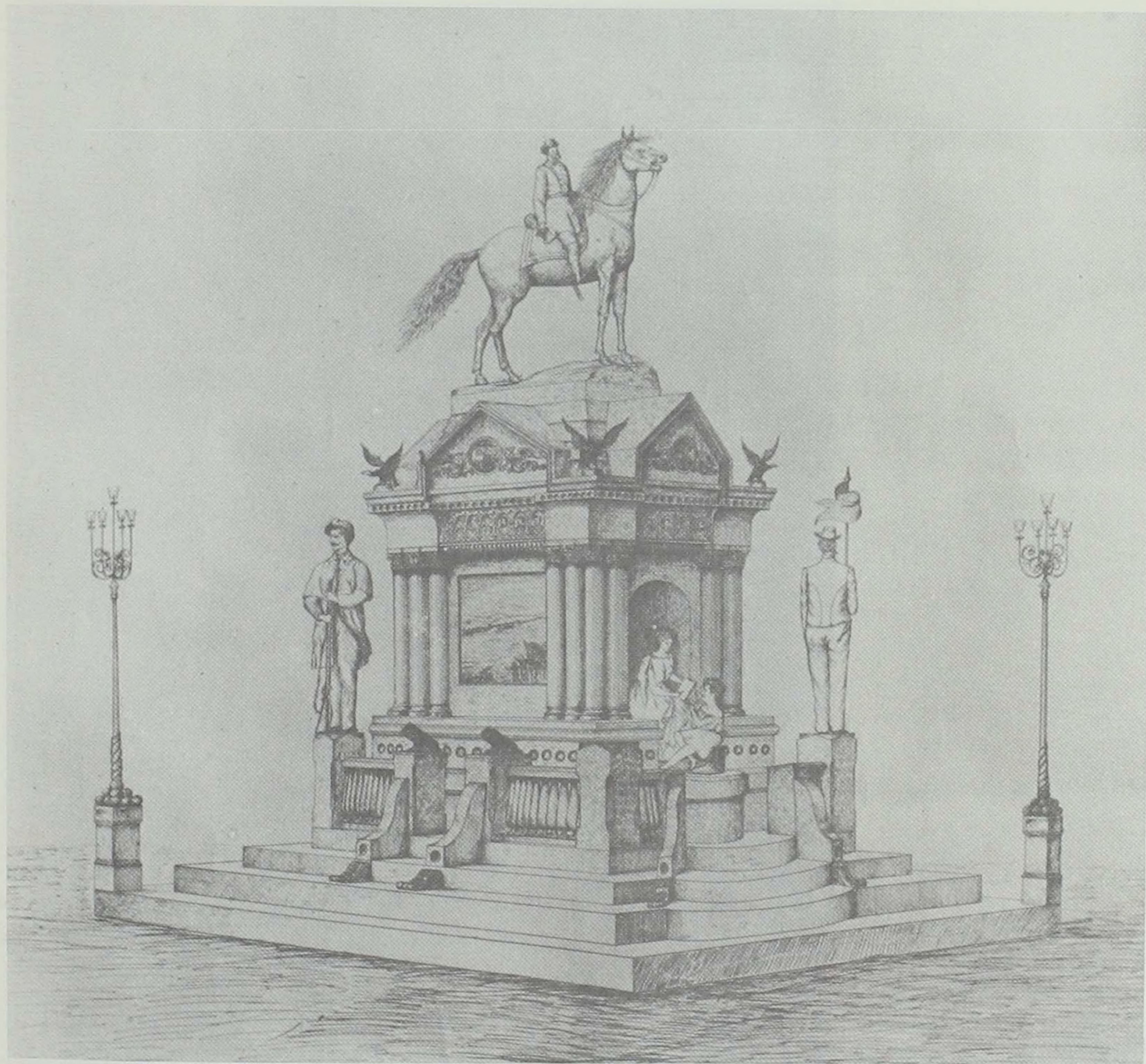
Despite this rationalization Ketcham longed to go to Rome where she could have her sculptures cut in marble. Here Italian stonecutters used an ancient pointing system to translate works from plaster to stone. It was this attraction which lured many American sculptors to Rome, including women such as Harriet Hosmer and Vinnie Ream. Ream went there to have her figure of Abraham Lincoln enlarged and cut in marble by Italian workmen.

Shortly after her Des Moines visit in 1886 Ketcham realized her ambition of traveling to Europe. She spent a year there and her husband and two sons were probably with her during this time. She was in Rome when her daughter, Roma Beatrice, was born on May 2, 1887. Whether Ketcham was pregnant before she left home is a matter of speculation. It seems reasonable to assume that she would not have undertaken such a long journey if she were expecting another child. While in Europe Ketcham visited galleries in France and Germany and spent some time in Florence but the greater part of her time was spent in Rome. Here she received instruction from Franklin Simmons (1839-1913), an expatriate who was famous in his day for his depiction of classical subjects in the ideal manner as well as for his public monuments and portrait busts. Ketcham also studied under Giovanni Ferrero, an Italian painter and engraver, who ran a school for American artists in Rome.

While in Rome Ketcham made a figure of Peri at the gates of heaven pleading for admis-

sion into paradise. Peri is a Persian mythological character who was made popular in the nineteenth century by Thomas Moore's book *Lalla Rookh*. Ketcham modeled the beautiful Peri with outstretched arm, luxurious, long hair, spread wings, and graceful drapery. This piece was cast in plaster and then cut in marble by Italian workers. It was completed just three days before Ketcham gave birth to her daughter, Roma. Upon her return to Mt. Pleasant, Ketcham displayed this piece in a draped and carefully lighted recess in the parlor of her home. After her death it was shown in the Iowa Building of the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago and it was later exhibited in the library of the Iowa State Capitol. What eventually became of *Peri* is not known. In fact, none of Ketcham's work seems to have remained in Iowa. At the time of her husband's death in 1921 two of the Ketchams' children, Albert and Roma (Roma Ketcham Farrell), were living in Seattle, Washington, and Ernest was a resident of Mendota, Missouri. They probably took some of their mother's work with them when they left their Mt. Pleasant home.

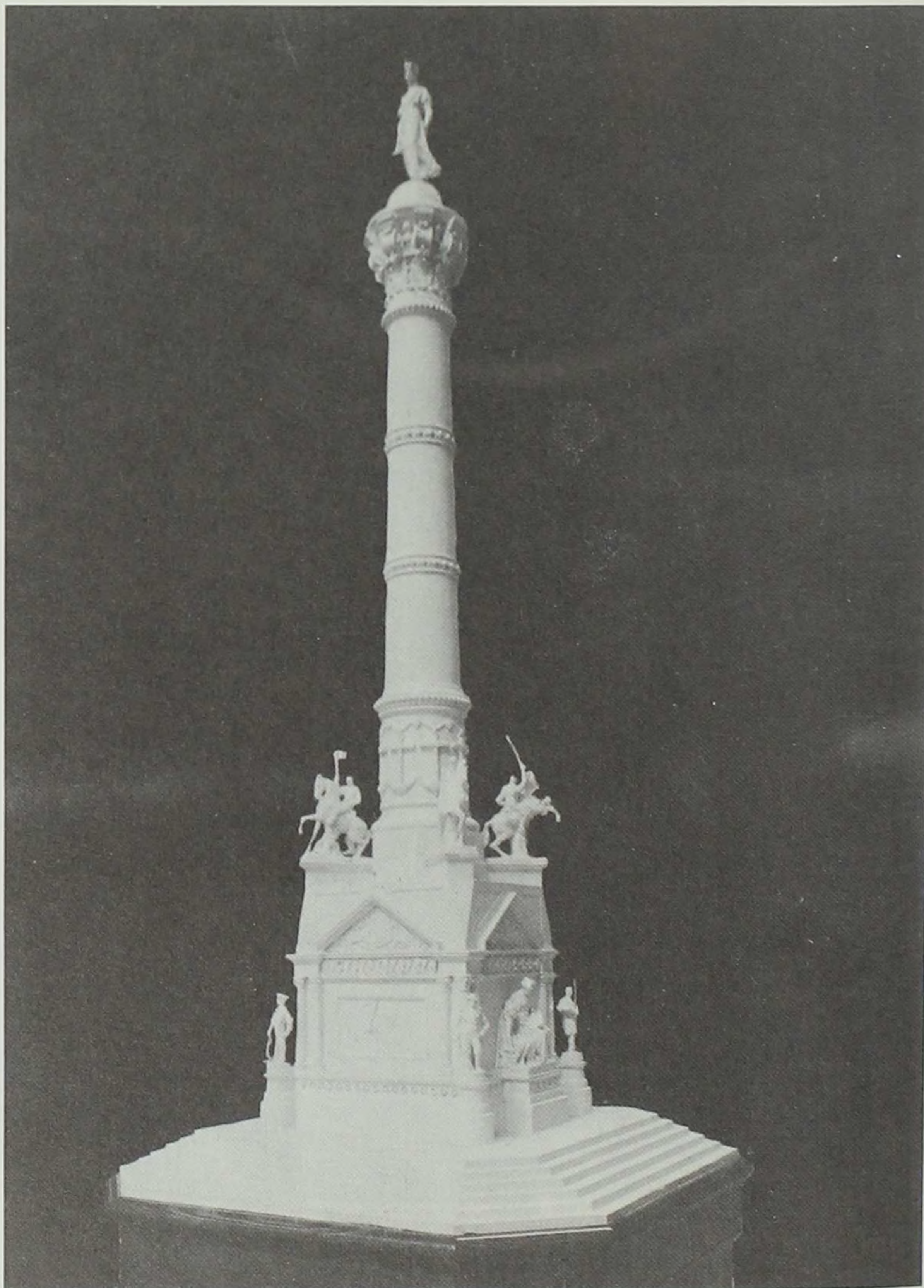
Ketcham also spent a good deal of her time in Europe copying paintings in the galleries which she visited. One of the pictures which she brought home was a copy of an angel in Raphael's *Madonna di Foligno* in the Vatican. She made a copy of this copy for her sister, Mary Jane Ketcham, of Burlington. She also copied a Rembrandt self-portrait and a Titian portrait of his daughter. Other pictures by unidentified artists which Ketcham copied and which were noted in news stories of the day included *Falconer's Bride*, *St. Michael and the Dragon*, *Marguerite at the Whispering Well*, and an unfinished madonna and child in the Dresden gallery. During Ketcham's lifetime copies of famous paintings were highly prized as symbols of culture for Victorian homes. Her efforts in this direction were thus praised rather than scoffed at as they probably would be today.



Ketcham's original prize-winning design which was to be notably altered. (SHSI)

In the spring of 1888 a commission appointed by the Iowa General Assembly announced a competition for plans for a monument honoring Iowa's Civil War veterans to be erected on the grounds of the state capitol. Three prizes ranging from \$500 to \$150 were offered for the best designs. Ketcham, who was determined to win first prize, spent the next year working on a plan for the monument. In June 1889 the commission announced that her sketch had won first place over forty-seven

others submitted by contestants throughout the country. Photographs of Ketcham's entry, along with contemporary newspaper descriptions, provide information about Ketcham's winning plan. Her design called for a bronze equestrian statue of heroic size mounted on an elaborate base at each corner of which was a standing figure representing the four branches of the armed service. On each side of the base was a bas-relief of a battle scene and above them a frieze with portraits of Iowa ser-



Ketcham's revised design with a tall column and Victory replacing the equestrian statue. (SHSI)

vicemen. Those to be honored were to be selected by the monument commission. In an arched niche at one end of the base was an allegorical figure representing History relating the story of the war to a youth, and at the other end a weeping allegorical figure of Iowa placing garlands on a funeral urn. Dimensions of the monument were 34 feet high, 45 feet long, and 30 feet wide. Judging from photographs of

other entries, it is hard to believe that an unbiased judge would have rated Ketcham's design the winner. Several others were superior both in their monumentality and the skill with which they were executed. The various elements of Ketcham's design were not well integrated and the drawing was hesitant and stiff. A soldier was missing from one corner of the base despite newspaper descriptions of fig-



The finished Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. Carl Rohl-Smith was responsible for interpreting Harriet A. Ketcham's design and completing the monument.

ures at all four corners. One can only speculate that Ketcham did not have sufficient mastery of perspective to enable her to draw the missing figure properly.

The *Des Moines Register* reported that some people were saying that Ketcham's design resembled an equestrian statue of Frederick the Great in Berlin. The *Mt. Pleasant Journal* retorted that "the design is all original with

Mrs. Ketcham who spent many anxious months in the development of her idea." This paper acknowledged widespread disappointment and jealousy on the part of other Iowa contestants who were passed over in favor of a woman but pointed out that they would hardly have been pleased had the award been given to an out-of-state contestant. The *Journal* contended the criticism was sour grapes and that

Ketcham had won the prize fairly and honestly. In retrospect, one cannot help but wonder if the fact that Ketcham's neighbor, James Harlan, was one of the competition judges did not have a salutary effect on the decision of the commission.

Ketcham, herself, must have had reservations about her winning design because she immediately set to work to improve it. Her revisions appeared in an illustration published in the *Burlington Hawkeye* at the time of her death in 1890. The entire monument had been enlarged and the equestrian figure on the top had been replaced by a tall column crowned with a figure of Victory. Eagles resting on the four corners of the base had been replaced with four large equestrian figures and the platform on which the base rests had been raised from three to six steps high. Ketcham seems to have borrowed most of the new elements in her revised plan from the designs of other competitors. Overall, the composition of the monument was now well integrated and the drawing was less naive than the original sketches. In fact, the improvement in Ketcham's design, both in concept and execution, was so marked that it seems as though some more experienced artist might have helped with the revisions.

In October 1890 Ketcham suffered a slight stroke and within four days she was dead. Ketcham's death was unexpected. Although of an extremely nervous disposition, she had continued working until her last illness. In addition to working on revisions of her winning plan, she had recently completed a bust of her daughter, Roma, as well as an ornamental carving on a large bookcase. "Her loss is not only to her family and her friends in Mt. Pleasant, but to the state of Iowa . . .," commented the *Mt. Pleasant Journal*. "For fifteen years or more she has studied and worked, has breasted opposition, has faced cold apathy, has conquered every obstacle, all for art." Mrs. Ketcham was unfortunate in being fifty years ahead of her time, the *Journal* said, for in the Mis-

issippi Valley people were too busy making money to be ready to indulge in the leisure of contemplating art.

The Twenty-fourth Iowa General Assembly meeting in 1892 approved Ketcham's plan for the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument and authorized its construction. In March 1894 the monument committee hired the Chicago sculptor, Carl Rohl-Smith, a native of Denmark, to carry out Ketcham's design. It is difficult to know the details of the design Ketcham submitted to the commission because her original drawings have been lost. In general, the monument as it now stands on the capitol grounds seems to conform to the sketch published in the *Burlington Hawkeye* at the time of her death.

In several instances, however, Rohl-Smith probably did not interpret Ketcham's design correctly. James Harlan, speaking at the cornerstone laying ceremony of the State Historical Building in July 1899, commented on certain "deformities" in three of the figures on the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument. He noted the absence of repose of the figure standing on the summit, the "inaptness" of the allegorical figure of Iowa, and the "misconception" of the bronze group representing History. Ketcham's original plan for a mourning allegorical figure of Iowa had been replaced by a female representing bountiful Iowa who was naked to the waist with head and shoulders thrust back and hands cupped under her thrust-out breasts which she offers for succor. She certainly does not look like a figure designed by a proper Victorian woman. The group called History, according to Mt. Pleasant tradition, was to be modeled after sketches made from a tintype of two young people living in Ketcham's neighborhood. She had taken these youngsters to the studio of a local photographer where she dressed them in flowing robes and posed the seated young woman reading a history of the war to her brother seated at her feet. This concept is

clearly shown in the photograph of Ketcham's original design where a young woman is shown seated in an arched niche reading to a youth. The niche was eliminated in the completed monument and the group as executed by Rohl-Smith depicts a stiff-backed, gaunt old woman staring straight ahead. A nude young boy offering her a scroll stands at her side. Harlan attributed these "deformities" to "an artist born and educated in the north of Europe."

Ketcham's conception for the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument with its granite base and column rising over 130 feet was impressive both in its massive scale and elaborate detail. But even more impressive were the number of bronze sculptures which Ketcham planned for this monument. These included:

Four equestrian figures of soldiers.
 Four standing figures of soldiers.
 Thirty-five medallions with portraits of Iowa soldiers.
 One medallion with the coat of arms of Iowa.
 Two bas-reliefs of battle scenes.
 Three female allegorical figures.
 One figure of a boy.

It is questionable if Harriet Ketcham's artistic skill and physical endurance would have been equal to such a monumental task. We can salute her, nevertheless, as a woman of tenacity and vision who had the daring and courage to conceive this elaborate monument and the willingness to undertake its construction. □