

THE AMERICAN GIRL IN SCULPTURE

By Isabel McDougall



FOR a long time the American girl has been sung, studied, romanced about; the painter has painted her; the illustrator—one in particular—has made her and himself illustrious. And now a sculptor hath set her forth, in her habit as she lives, whether the same be severely tailor-made or covered with all the frills of a Parisian man milliner's invention. And the

sculptor—here is the most striking part of it—is herself an American girl.

She was born in St. Louis but her home is in Chicago, the city which, rightly or wrongly, claims to be more characteristically American than any other in the land. Her training has been entirely American, local even, and was comprised in four or five years of study under Lorado Taft at the Chicago Art Institute. Her name is Bessie Onahotema Potter; her middle name was given her by an Indian chief some twenty years ago, when her mother sought something sweet and original enough for her rosy baby. "Onahotema," suggested the governor of the Choctaw nation. "It means give with an open hand."

There is a tradition that the little Bessie Onahotema was a prize baby. If so, she paid for that innocent early distinction by eight years of invalidhood. To-day she is very small, but not fragile; she has the color and the brightness of perfect health. Robert W. Vonnoh says she looks like the portraits of Madame Lebrun, and there is a charming photograph of her wearing a large white cap and posed like the famous French woman. Vonnoh has painted her more than once, so has F. W. Freer, so has Caroline Wade, so have half the artistic fraternity of Chicago. Visitors from other cities always find the way to her studio: among these have been August Franzen, Lungren, Raffaelli, who called her "an impressionist in plaster"; Julia Marlowe and James Herne; souvenirs of their visits remain in the shape of statuettes of "Juliet," full of pensive grace, and of the kindly old farmer of "Shore Acres."

At the time of the World's Fair Mr. Lorado Taft, who was in charge of the sculptural decoration of the Horticultural Building, found great need for assistance. Every man capable of spreading plaster or using a hatchet had been already pressed into service, and then Mr.



what you like. Bring rabbits if they can do the work."

Mr. Taft's "rabbits" could and did do the work, making up in intelligence and zeal what they lacked in physical strength. Bessie Potter was among the half dozen bright girls who camped out that autumn and winter in the huge glass building, climbing up and down ladders to model fourteen-foot goddesses, enlarging small sketches, making ornamental designs. All of which was excellent practical training for young sculptors. Bessie Potter, moreover, was represented by two works in the Art

Palace, a great honor for so young a girl, and one which gave her free admission to all its treasures. Strangely enough, she was more interested in the paintings, especially impressionist paintings, than in the exhibition of sculpture.

After the Fair Miss Potter had her share of orders for portrait busts, the one re-



MISS BESSIE POTTER

munerative branch of the sculptor's art. Between whiles, to please herself, she began making rapid little clay sketches of any friend who would pose to her for an hour. Soon a row of modern maidens, blocked out in various careless, lifelike positions, were drying on the radiator "to see if they would crack." Most of them did, and were thrown back into the tub to mix again with clay for new attempts. Some were rescued by appreciative friends. The artists began to drop in to see "Bessie's little Troubetskoiis." She had applied the Franco-Russian's rapid, nervous touch in a fashion at once *fin de siècle* and all womanly. Here was the real, familiar-spirited, dainty, nineteenth century girl. And lo, the unknown moulders of the Tanagra figurines might have desired her for a model. They would have applauded that winsome little lady playing the violin, or that other fanning herself with a large feather fan, or the third in hat and veil who has thrown herself carelessly on a high-backed chair, not as if she were sitting for her por-



trait, but as though in another minute she might rise and walk away. Their lifelike, their momentary—if one may say so—their unstatuesque air is the charm of these diminutive yet entirely adequate sketches.

The artist has not confined herself to figurines. Her bust of David Swing showed what she could do in the presentation of a rugged personality. Another very clever head, of the wife of A. P. Proctor, the sculptor, modeled in rather low relief, reminds one of the reserve and the poetry of Herbert Adams' portraits. Two small heads—little "William B.," with his finger in his mouth, and his sweet sister "Mildred," with all her pretty curls pinned up on top of her head—were shown and ad-



mired at last spring's fine exhibition of the National Sculpture Society of New York. Boston, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Cleveland and other cities have requested these figurines for their exhibitions, and the most gratifying part of their little journeys in the world is that many never return, but remain in the keeping of an artist or a connoisseur whose approbation is worth winning.

To do it justice the Chicago public has not waited for an Eastern endorsement, although with it Miss Potter's work is in greater demand. It has become the thing for wealthy and fashionable women to sit for these portrait sketches. Herein lies the danger of the artist lowering her standard to the taste of her public, rather than keeping it up to the demand of her own more exacting conscience. Happily, there appears no sign of this. What pleases the public is the prettiness and grace of her subjects, their easy attitudes, their smart gowns, their "style."

What the artists like is the boldness of treatment, the truly sculptural instinct which makes these small things harmonious compositions from every



point of view.

"I understand by art," said William Morris, "a man's expression of his pleasure in his work." Surely no dull moment can have attended the creation of these animated little productions of Miss Potter's art. Indeed, it might almost seem as though a star laughed and under that they were born.

Statuettes obviously need not conform to the requirements for figures of heroic proportions. But smallness of size does not, in Miss Potter's case, at all events, imply smallness of style, as her recent figure of one of the literary men of the West needs only enlarging to be entirely satisfactory in the dimensions of life. She is constantly gaining in strength, and the pieces on which she is at present at



work bid fair to be the best which this veritable American girl has yet produced.

Miss Potter can point with pride to the fact that she is the first sculptress to treat this heretofore essentially masculine art from a feminine standpoint.

Clay, as a medium of artistic expression, has not been popular with the art students of this country, but these little figures certainly demonstrate the attractiveness and possibilities of sculpture for the display of woman's artistic ability.

