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HARRIET HOSMER

Watertown, Massachusetts, 1830-1908

*PUCK AND WILL-O'-THE-WISP*

c.1864

Marble; the figure of Puck titled to the front and signed to the reverse 'H. Hosmer Fecit Roma'; the figure of Will-o'-the-wisp titled to the front  
81.5 and 78 cm high

## PROVENANCE

Sold Phillips Son & Neal, Contents of Park Hall, Hayfield, Derbyshire, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1978;

Bonham's, London, Fine Decorative Arts, 12 July 2023, lot 66;

Where acquired by L U L L O • P A M P O U L I D E S.

## LITERATURE

D. Sherwood, *Harriet Hosmer: American Sculptor, 1830-1908*, Missouri, 1991.

J. Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture*, Yale University Press, 1990.

This marble sculpture of *Puck*, the mischievous sprite from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, together with his companion figure of *Will-o'-the-wisp*, was the American artist Harriet Hosmer's most popular composition. Born in Watertown, Massachusetts, Hosmer was one of the most successful female artists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and spent most of her life living and working in Rome (fig.1). There she was a leading figure in an important group of women artists known as the 'sisterhood of American lady sculptors' who expressed their feminist and anti-slavery views through the neoclassical sculptures they produced.

Between 1853 and 1860 Hosmer was apprenticed to the Welsh sculptor John Gibson (1790-1866) who gave her a studio at the bottom of his garden in Rome. The sculptures she made at this time followed Gibson's neoclassical style, but reflected her views, often representing the struggle of historical women such as Beatrice Cenci (fig.2) - an abused young Roman noblewoman who, in an attempt to escape imprisonment and repeated rape, killed her father, Count Francesco Cenci; and Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra (fig.3) - who was a cultured monarch that fostered an intellectual environment open to scholars and philosophers and who protected religious minorities while also defying the power of Rome.

However, with a need to become financially self-sufficient and to remain living and working in Rome, Hosmer knew that sculptures of literary figures were often more commercially successful. With this as her motivation, she created esteemed works like the *Medusa* (fig.4), where the sitter is depicted as a tragic female victim being turned from a beautiful mortal into a gorgon, rather than the typical grotesque monster; and the models of *Puck* and *Will-o'-the-wisp* of which an example of each is presented here. Indeed, the whimsical figure of *Puck* - conceived in c.1854 - was so successful a composition that Hosmer carved over 30 replicas and generated over 30,000 dollars in profit from it. One of the replicas was even purchased in 1859 by the Prince of Wales - the future King Edward VII - from his own 'pocket money'.

Even though versions of *Puck* and *Will-o'-the-wisp* as individual figures can be found today in museum collections as diverse as the Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington), the Art Gallery of New South Wales (Melbourne), the Walker Art Gallery (Liverpool) and the Huntington Library (San Marino), as well as in private collections, it is very rare to find a surviving pairing such as the present figures: indeed, the only other known pair appear to be those in the Watertown Free Public Library, on the outskirts of Boston.

Hosmer conceived *Will-o'-the Wisp* as a complementary figure to *Puck* in 1856. His subject matter was based on the folktale of a fairy who turned into a radiant glow, covering the marshes at night to mislead travellers. The pointed ears and horns allude to his mischievous





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character, and his bat wings and the flame issuing from his head refer to his nocturnal nature. The torch cradled in his right arm symbolizes his ability to assume a glowing form. Despite the works' high quality and literary appeal, *Will-o'-the Wisp* - nicknamed 'my daughter' by the artist - proved to be less popular than *Puck* and consequently led to far fewer versions being carved, thereby making the present pairing an even rarer survival.

Hosmer was - as both an artist and an icon - a central figure in the modern era, even if she is little known today outside of the United States. The Anglo-American writer Henry James referred to the 'sisterhood of American lady sculptors' that formed around her, which, seen through today's eyes, represented a special - if not crucial - moment for the history of art, feminism and homosexuality. This is primarily because they actively rejected heterosexual norms and the social conventions expected of women: Hosmer rejected marriage, supported herself financially, lived in romantic relationships with other women and wore masculine clothes. However, her greatest legacy must be the fact that she paved the way for other women to work as professional sculptors and, as argued by Frances Power Cobbe in 1863, showed that women could be creative artistic geniuses - just as much as men - and that Hosmer's work was pioneering a new women's art that celebrated female strength and power.<sup>1</sup>



Fig.1 Harriet Hosmer (centre) in the courtyard of her studio, Rome, 1867  
Albumen print, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

<sup>1</sup>F. Cobbe, *Essays on the Pursuits of Women*, 1863, pp.58-101.





Fig.2  
Harriet Hosmer, *Beatrice Cenci*, 1857  
Marble, Mercantile Library at the University of Missouri, St. Louis



Fig.3  
Harriet Hosmer, *Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra*, c.1859  
Marble, Art Institute of Chicago  
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Fig.4  
Harriet Hosmer, *Medusa*, c.1854  
Marble, Minneapolis Institute of Art











