

Immortal Hands

Tiny, but iconic



but I will not sit for the *formatore*" (an artisan specialist in making molds).

Hosmer made the mold, from which Radcliffe's is the original cast. In 1896 she said that she had more than once refused to have the hands cast in a substance harder than plaster, but eventually she permitted an edition in bronze. Her friend Cornelia Crow Carr, editor of *Harriet Hosmer: Letters and Memories* (1912), acquired

IMAGE IS APPROXIMATELY THREE-QUARTERS ACTUAL SIZE

THE SCHLESINGER LIBRARY at the Radcliffe Institute possesses this plaster cast of two clasped hands, a woman's and a man's. The plaster bears traces of a light wash of paint to mimic flesh. Analysts have claimed to see in the bone structure of the woman's hand evidence of tuberculosis. Both hands are petite. To Dolly Sherwood, biographer of the artist who made the cast, it seemed impossible that the "hands are those of living human beings, not Lilliputian dolls." Yet these are the hands of the larger-than-life lovers Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

The cast is the work of Harriet Hosmer. Born in Watertown, Massachusetts, she moved as a young woman in 1852 to Rome, where she established herself as a

neoclassical sculptor and an engagingly eccentric member of the expatriate set. Nathaniel Hawthorne found her "a small, brisk, wide-awake figure, of queer and funny aspect, yet not ungraceful..." and is said to have made her the model for Hilda in his novel *The Marble Faun*. She wore epicene clothing, had her hair cut short, and rode about Rome alone on horseback.

In late 1853 she met the Brownings, in Rome to escape the winter chill of their home in Florence. "[V]ery clever she is, only 24, and one of the frankest, bluntest, nicest little creatures that ever took my fancy," Elizabeth wrote of "Hatty." Hosmer conceived the idea of casting the entwined hands of the poets. Elizabeth consented, the sculptor reported years later, "provided you will cast them yourself,

the original cast and the artist's papers, and Carr's granddaughter, Isabella Carr Leighton, gave the collection to Radcliffe.

Clasped Hands was a critical success. Hawthorne wrote that the piece symbolized "the individuality and heroic union of two, high, poetic lives." Dolly Sherwood observed in her *Harriet Hosmer, American Sculptor, 1830-1908* (1992), "The *Clasped Hands* carried a more sensual message in the nineteenth-century world, where the touch of a hand hinted at a great deal more. Hosmer's casting of the poets' hands and the experience involved in the process may have inspired the metaphor in *Andrea del Sarto*, composed by Robert Browning in the following year: 'Your soft hand is a woman of itself, / And mine the man's bared breast she curls inside.'"