

# NARRATIVE TEXTS

## Elisabet Ney, Sculptor, 1833-1907

Elisabet Ney baffled her neighbors in Hempstead, Texas. She was German, aloof, and unsociable. She wore odd clothes—long, flowing robes like a goddess of antiquity, bloomers, even trousers for horseback riding around her plantation. She liked to sleep outdoors in a hammock. She would not eat meat. She and her male companion went by different last names, although they appeared to be the parents of two little boys.<sup>1</sup>

Gossip did not bother Elisabet. Few realized that in Europe she had sculpted the images of famous men: Schopenhauer, Garibaldi, Bismarck, King Ludwig II of Bavaria. In Heidelberg she met Edmund Montgomery, a Scottish medical student who shared her liberal philosophy. The two married legally but kept their status a private matter. Elisabet apparently was participating in political intrigue when events forced the couple to leave Europe hastily in 1870.<sup>2</sup>

They settled first in Georgia, where their first son was born, then traveled through the upper Midwest seeking a more compatible milieu. They had a second child and were living in Texas by 1873, where little Arthur, not quite two years old, died of diphtheria. Elisabet made a plaster death mask, then burned his body to prevent the spread of disease. This incident gave rise to dark rumors about her behavior.<sup>3</sup> For 20 years Elisabet devoted herself to raising her younger son, Lorne, but he ultimately disappointed her by marrying a young woman whom Elisabet considered unworthy.<sup>4</sup>

Finally she received commissions to sculpt again. The artist created heroic life-size statues of Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin for the Chicago World's Fair of 1893. Marble versions of these statues now stand in the Texas capitol rotunda and in the U.S. Capitol. Needing larger workspace, Ney had a studio of classic design built in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Austin. She sculpted the Confederate general Albert Sidney Johnson and what is considered her masterpiece, *Lady Macbeth*.

Elisabet sought to establish an academy of fine arts at The University of Texas at Austin, offering to teach for free. Her proposal was rejected, but, four years after her death, friends founded the Texas Fine Arts Association in her honor and converted her studio into a museum.

### Quotations

*She wears bloomers and other outré costumes that she calls practical.*—A neighbor of Ney and Montgomery in Georgia<sup>5</sup>

*Women are fools . . . to be bothered with housework. Look at me. I sleep in a hammock which requires no making up. I break an egg and sip it raw. I make lemonade in a glass and then rinse it, and my housework is done for the day.*—Elisabet Ney<sup>6</sup>

*I was busy with a more important art, the art of molding flesh and blood.*—Ney explaining why her artistic output diminished while her child was young<sup>7</sup>

*Though I had not come to this country ever to work in my art again, I took it up at last as a consolation—only I experienced deeper and more cruel disappointment. And my present work, *Lady Macbeth*, comes as a result of these experiences.*—Letter from Ney to a friend<sup>8</sup>



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## Photo

ITC 68-0706. Caption: "Ney self-portrait at age 30." Ney Museum, Austin, Texas.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sources for biographical information in this article are Mary Elizabeth Nye, "Elisabet Ney: Texas' First Lady of Sculpture," in Francis Edward Abernethy, ed., *Legendary Ladies of Texas* (Dallas: E-Heart Press, 1981), pp. 95-105; Marian L. Martinello, Emily Cutrer, and Al Lowman, *Elisabet Ney: Artist, Woman, Texan*, study guide for use with audiovisual program (San Antonio: Institute of Texan Cultures, 1983); Ann Fears Crawford and Crystal Sasse Ragsdale, *Women in Texas: Their Lives, Their Experiences, Their Accomplishments* (Austin: State House Press, 1992), pp. 128-41.

<sup>2</sup> Bismarck hoped to annex Ludwig's kingdom to Prussia. It has been suggested that he contracted with Ney to spy in Ludwig's court, an assignment that she failed to perform satisfactorily. See Nye, "Texas' First Lady of Sculpture," pp. 96-97; Martinello et al., *Elisabet Ney: Artist, Woman, Texan*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>3</sup> The circumstances surrounding Arthur's death are discussed in Nye, "Texas' First Lady of Sculpture," pp. 98-99; in Crawford and Ragsdale, *Women in Texas*, p. 136; and in Martinello et al., *Elisabet Ney: Artist, Woman, Texan*, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Ney's estrangement from Lorne is described in Martinello et al., *Elisabet Ney: Artist, Woman, Texan*, p. 27; in Crawford and Ragsdale, *Women in Texas*, p. 137; and in Nye, "Texas' First Lady of Sculpture," p. 100.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Nye, "Texas' First Lady of Sculpture," p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Ruthe Winegarten, *Texas Women: A Pictorial History from Indians to Astronauts* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1986), p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Martinello et al., *Elisabet Ney: Artist, Woman, Texan*, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Elisabet Ney, letter to German singer Schumann-Heink, quoted in Martinello et al., *Elisabet Ney: Artist, Woman, Texan*, pp. 17, 30.