

MARGARET FRENCH CRESSON: TALENTED DAUGHTER OF A FAMOUS FATHER

The American sculptor Daniel Chester French (1850–1931) is renowned for his monumental works, including the seated Abraham Lincoln for the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. His daughter, Margaret French Cresson (1889–1973), was also a talented sculptor, as well as a writer and preservationist. She grew up in New York City and at Chesterwood, the country home, studio, and gardens her father had established in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, as a respite from urban life.

Margaret French Cresson was deeply rooted in this property in the Berkshire Hills that was, and continues to be, a hotbed of creativity. In 1969 Chesterwood became a site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation thanks to her generous donation of the studio and a portion of its acreage. Her pivotal role is being celebrated this year with 50th-anniversary festivities and an exhibition this past spring that explored her life, art, and community involvement.¹ This article outlines how Margaret French Cresson capitalized on her innate talent and wide-ranging contacts to forge a successful career in art.

DAUGHTER

Margaret was born in 1889 to Daniel Chester French and his new wife, Mary Adams French, in his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. Seven years later Margaret's parents were seeking a country home convenient to New York and happened upon the Warner Farm in Stockbridge. They purchased this property, which included a barn that French fashioned into a studio. Finding it insufficient, he enlisted the architect Henry Bacon to design a new one, complete with north-facing skylights and a 26-foot ceiling to accommodate larger works.

As her father sculpted and her mother entertained, Margaret spent idyllic summers at Chesterwood. She enjoyed playing with scrap pieces of clay, exploring the woods, and swimming in ponds. She and her father took long walks along the woodland trails he had designed with his



Margaret French Cresson with her bust of her father in the studio at Chesterwood, 1934, Chapin Library, Williams College, gift of the National Trust for Historic Preservation / Chesterwood



(ABOVE LEFT) Photograph of Margaret modeling for the *T.A. Chapman Memorial*, c. 1896, Chapin Library, Williams College, gift of the National Trust for Historic Preservation / Chesterwood ■ (ABOVE RIGHT) Daniel Chester French, *T.A. Chapman Memorial*, 1896, Forest Home Cemetery, Milwaukee; photo: Michael D. Hill, Jr.

boyhood friend the naturalist and ornithologist William Brewster (1851–1919). French wrote that “Margaret has developed into a rosy little body ... She revels in the flowers and all the wonders of nature and is happy as can be.”²³ As a teenager, she kept a diary, a detailed account of the books she was reading, as well as of the guests at dinner and weekly teas, flirtations with boys and her father’s male models, rollicking picnics, town parades, and festive parties.

French enlisted Margaret to pose for many important works, including the *Clark Memorial* (1894, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts), the *T.A. Chapman Memorial* (1896, Milwaukee), the *Newcomer Memorial Fountain* (1902–04, Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Baltimore), and as Evangeline for the *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Memorial* (1912–14, Cambridge). Many of French’s artist friends also took an interest in her. The impressionist Robert Vonnoh (1858–1933) used a photograph of Margaret in her father’s study as preparation for a portrait of her; the final painting (1913) pulses with light, even as the moody young woman seems somewhat uncomfortable in her role. Others who employed Margaret as a model include French’s only female student and studio assistant, Evelyn Beatrice Longman (1874–1954), impressionist painter Milton Bancroft (1866/67–1947), portraitist

William H. Hyde (1853–1943), muralist Violet Oakley (1874–1960), and the Swiss-American Adolfo Müller-Ury (1862–1947).

In 1909 Margaret debuted in New York society and quickly became the center of the Stockbridge summer social scene. Throngs of young people traveled from the city to Chesterwood. Daytime activities included tennis and croquet, canoeing, frolicking in party dresses, and lolling on steps and porches. In the evenings, Margaret hosted “nights



ROBERT VONNOH (1858–1933), *Portrait of Margaret French*, 1913, oil on canvas, 24 1/2 x 29 1/2 in., Chesterwood, bequest of Margaret French Cresson, NT 73.45.1299



filled with revelry”: dinners, wine tastings, *tableaux vivants*, charades, concerts, and costume parties. Japanese lanterns lit up the garden, creating a romantic atmosphere for midnight promenades.

French took pleasure in his daughter’s activities: he would move sculptures in progress to the side of his studio to create a party space, and on one occasion he constructed a covered walkway from the residence to the studio so that costumed guests could avoid the elements. With her parents hosting guests who included architects, artists, and wealthy patrons, the cream of Berkshires society (the Choates, Morses, Sedgwicks, Robinson Smiths, Winthrops), and the occasional celebrity (Isadora Duncan, Henry James, Edith Wharton), it was only natural that Margaret would become a gracious hostess, too.

On the heels of this charmed adolescence came World War I, which took the lives of many in Margaret’s generation. Philip Mills was apparently her first serious beau, and his death in France in 1918 devastated her. Margaret had been working for the Duryea War Relief commission and volunteering at the Red Cross Debarkation Hospital in New York, where she met sick and injured soldiers. She described the hospital as “full of tragedies and comedies we cannot forget.” Distraught over Philip’s death and weakened by overwork, anxiety, and influenza contracted from returning soldiers, Margaret sank into a depression. On the first anniversary of his death,

(ABOVE LEFT) **MARGARET FRENCH**, *Girl with the Curls*, c. 1920, marble, 20 in. high, Chesterwood, bequest of Margaret French Cresson, NT 73.45.1431 ■ (ABOVE) **MARGARET FRENCH CRESSON**, *Frances Thankful Warner*, 1929, gilt bronze relief, 5 x 3 3/4 in., Chesterwood, gift of the Daniel Chester French Foundation, NT 69.38.654; both photos: Lisa Vollmer

she wrote a poignant letter to him: “I picked some red poppies for you this morning and arranged them in vases in my room in front of your pictures ... I had never known sorrow before, or grief or pain or unhappiness ... for my darling, you were my life, and I didn’t fully realize until I had lost you what a part of it you had become.”

That same summer, Margaret met her future husband, William Penn Cresson (1873–1932), a Philadelphia-born architect, diplomat, lawyer, writer, and lecturer at Princeton University. Known as “Penn,” he took an active role in trying to cure her depression. Their letters document his insistence that Margaret would be healthier if they married, as well as her reluctance to start a relationship while in such a delicate state.

In 1920, Margaret finally sought help and was tended to by psychiatrists at what is now the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge. She



In 1941, this youngster was photographed admiring Margaret French Cresson's *Father and Son*, marble, c. 1924, Chapin Library, Williams College, gift of the National Trust for Historic Preservation / Chesterwood

wrote about her anguish to Penn: "I'm not fit for marriage or any responsibilities or work or even play, and so I might just as well give up all thought of such eventualities ... feeling like the wreck of a mis-spent life." After a month of treatment and Penn's encouragement, she seemed to be improving, and on May 25, 1920, she wrote him, "my life meant nothing to me until you came into it, it would mean nothing to me again if you were to go out of it." The two exchanged letters that grew in intensity as Margaret slowly allowed herself to love again.

The couple were engaged in August 1920. With her mother's satin wedding dress packed in a trunk, the family traveled to Italy that November. On January 10, 1921, Margaret and Penn were married in a 12th-century monastery in Taormina, Sicily. They took up residence in an apartment in Washington, D.C., where she kept a small sculpting studio. Summers were spent at the Dormouse, a cottage near Chesterwood that French had purchased and renovated in 1920. John C. Johansen (1876–1964), an artist who lived nearby, captured their domestic bliss in a 1921 painting of the couple in their living room. In 1927 Johansen painted a similar double portrait of French and his wife in Chesterwood's parlor.

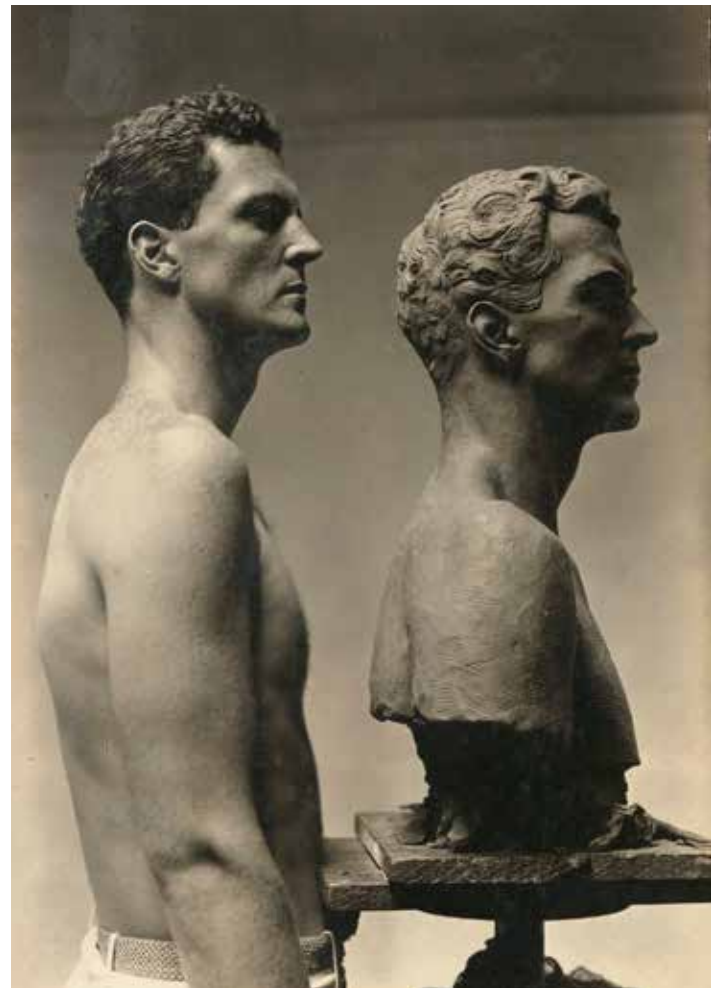
ARTIST

Margaret French freely admitted, "I find it a great help, in the Art World, to be my father's daughter."³ Yet she was a truly talented artist in her own right. She had shown early aptitude in drawing and design, and by 1912 was taking classes at the New York School of Applied Design for Women. Her numerous watercolor studies and sketches are now in the Chapin Library at Williams College (Williamstown, Massachusetts), having been transferred there from Chesterwood this past April. On a dare from a family friend, the opera singer Rosalie Miller, Margaret attempted to model a head and found it more challenging than she had imagined. In 1915, she acquiesced to lessons with her father, and later studied with Abastenia St. Leger Eberle (1878–1942) in New York and George Demetrius (1896–1974) in Boston.

One of Margaret's earliest efforts was *Girl with the Curls* (1920), a likeness of her Stockbridge acquaintance Helen Geary. This and

An Italian Peasant (1920), a head of a swashbuckling young man, debuted at the Stockbridge Art Exhibition in September 1920. *Girl with the Curls* immediately earned accolades: one reviewer wrote, "The natural astonishment felt by its admirers, on learning that it was the first exhibited work by a new sculptress, will be lessened when they learn that the artist is the daughter of Daniel Chester French, and so comes naturally by her poetic inspiration and distinction of workmanship." In October 1921 these works went to the National Academy of Design exhibition in New York and then to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in January 1922. French kept *Girl with the Curls* in his studio; he wrote to his daughter, "Everybody who comes to my studio admires it and it seems as if it ought to sell."⁴

Over the years, Margaret exhibited regularly not only at the Stockbridge Art Exhibitions, but also at the National Academy, Pennsylvania Academy, and Art Institute of Chicago. She had solo exhibitions at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. (1924), Grand Central Art Galleries in New York (1930), and Doll & Richards in Boston (1937). Her work won many prizes, including the National Academy's 1927 Shaw Prize (given to the best woman exhibitor) for a Renaissance-style bust, *Francesca*.



Photograph of George Merrill, Jr. with Margaret French Cresson's 1938 clay bust of him, Chapin Library, Williams College, gift of the National Trust for Historic Preservation / Chesterwood



Photograph of Margaret French and her father at work in the studio at Chesterwood, 1915, Chapin Library, Williams College, gift of the National Trust for Historic Preservation / Chesterwood

Margaret particularly excelled at bas-relief portraits of young children. This is notable as she and her husband had no children, though she later became “godmother” to many Stockbridge boys and girls. Her first commission came in 1920: Mrs. Vernon Bailey wanted a relief of her late son. Margaret confided to her future husband: “I’ve never made a relief but ... I can’t bear to turn down a perfectly good order just because I don’t know how!”⁵⁵ Two days later she wrote, “I’m getting on so well with my head of [the] boy and it is certainly getting to look a good deal like the photographs.”⁵⁶ Margaret often worked from images, and the Chesterwood Archives at Chapin Library contain boxes of her study photographs of children. Her charming profile of Frances Thankful Warner is expertly modeled; Margaret clearly relied on a photograph, but added an apple to the girl’s chubby hands. Her close friend Theresa Cunningham requested a bas-relief of her son, Ingersol “Sandy” Cunningham, who remains associated with Chesterwood. (He is a former member of its advisory council and currently an honorary member.)

Margaret also modeled sensitive portrait busts of young children, including her cousin William Henry Vanderbilt (1947). Babies and toddlers proved to be challenging subjects, especially active little Larry Lunt, who crawled about on the Chesterwood porch. In *Father and Son*, Margaret portrayed him writhing in the hands of his father — a staff doctor at the Austen Riggs Center.

Margaret found many of her subjects in Stockbridge, and acquaintances came to her requesting portraits. The wife of the rector of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church asked her for a portrait of her son, George Merrill, Jr. (1909–2005). In 1927 Margaret fashioned an image of this attractive Princeton-bound student that proceeded to win the Crowninshield Prize

at the Stockbridge Art Exhibition two years later. She sculpted two more portraits of him in 1938 and 1948, titling the series *The Evolution of Man*.

Margaret’s personal connections brought her illustrious subjects, such as her close friend Richard Hale (1892–1981), a baritone with the Metropolitan Opera who later turned to acting and was active with the Stockbridge Theatre Festival. (He also sang at the funeral of Mary Adams French.) Among her other sitters were the painter Henry W. Parton and the Croatian-American artist Ivan Meštrović and his wife, Olga, who spent a summer living near Chesterwood. Her commissions included likenesses of the Antarctic explorer *Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd* (1927, bronze now at the National Portrait Gallery; plaster at the New-York Historical Society); *James Monroe* (1929, James Monroe Law Library, Fredericksburg, Virginia); and philanthropist *George Walker Weld* (1930, Weld Boat-house, Harvard University). Margaret’s commissions for memorial tablets included the *Hideyo Noguchi Memorial Tablet* (1930, Woodlawn Cemetery, The Bronx) and the *Frank Fuller Murdock Commemorative Tablet* (1922, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, North Adams).

French was thrilled with his daughter’s success, writing to a friend in 1927, “This letter would not be complete without my bragging a little about my daughter Margaret, who has been doing some good things in sculpture recently and is now on the professional list, having accepted money for her output.”⁵⁷

Margaret’s most personal subjects emerged from her own family: a marble portrait relief of her mother, fashioned after a professional studio photograph; at least three portraits of her father: a profile relief for a medalion, a bronze portrait bust (1924, Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York), and a larger plaster portrait adapted from the Yaddo work (1932, Chesterwood); and a bronze portrait of her husband in military uniform (1923, Chesterwood). She also designed her husband’s memorial tablet at St. Paul’s and a poignant portrait relief of her cousin, Louise Schoonmaker Chilton, who had died at 29, leaving three young children. In addition, Margaret created the *Schoonmaker-Chilton Memorial* marble altar (1930, Mount Repose Cemetery, Kingston, New York). Finally, with her cousin’s wife, the architect Helen Douglass French, Margaret designed her father’s tombstone (1934, Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord), which features a laurel wreath bound by a set of sculpting tools, inscribed “A Heritage of Beauty.”

Margaret collaborated with her father on commissions, including the *Bashford Dean Memorial Tablet* (1930; Metropolitan Museum of Art) and the *Edward Mallinckrodt Tablet* for the chemical laboratory at Harvard University (1928). She completed some of her father’s unfinished works after his death, including a bronze portrait bust of *Daniel Webster* (1932, Franklin, New Hampshire). One reviewer found the latter “a most excellent characterization, a work which in its modeling shows quite obviously, to the informed accord, the firm touch of Daniel Chester French, and the more delicate but likewise knowing handling of his daughter.”⁵⁸

The early 1930s were not easy for Margaret, who wrote in her exhibition notebook: “Pappa died in October 1931, and my Penn died in May, 1932, and I did not exhibit again for five years.” Her final work, dated 1960–61, was a portrait head of Stefan Lorant (1901–1907), a friend and noted biographer of Abraham Lincoln.

PRESERVATIONIST

Ownership of Chesterwood devolved upon Margaret after the deaths of her father in 1931 and her mother in 1939. Throughout the 1930s and ’40s, she summered there, sculpting in her father’s studio and writing a seminal biography of him, *Journey into Fame* (1947, Harvard University Press). In the 1950s she returned to live at Chesterwood full-time. Margaret was driven to preserve French’s artistic legacy and amassed a large collection of his preparatory studies, plaster casts, and finished works.

In 1954, Margaret French Cresson took the first step in the establishment of Chesterwood as a museum by donating the studio and 18



acres to the Trustees of Reservations, a private, Massachusetts-based conservation and preservation group. Based on a mutual decision with the Trustees, in 1962 she transferred ownership of Chesterwood to the newly created Daniel Chester French Foundation. Six years later, Cresson and the foundation ceded the property (except the residence, to which she retained life rights) to the National Trust for Historic Preservation as a memorial to Daniel Chester French and the classic period of sculpture in the United States. After her death in 1973, the residence was also transferred to the Trust.

James Biddle, former president of the National Trust, wrote, “No one has made a more significant contribution than Margaret French. Her 30-year effort has created at Chesterwood a collection ... that, in the field of American art, is unequalled in its comprehensiveness.”⁹ Indeed, it is thanks to Margaret’s vision, energy, and perseverance that Chesterwood survives as a testament to her father’s life work. The site is gradually expanding its representation of Margaret’s contributions by incorporating her biography into guide training, adding her portrait of Penn Cresson to the new Collections Study Gallery, and exhibiting her sculptures in the studio and residence. ●

Information: *Chesterwood* (chesterwood.org) is open daily through October 27. On September 7, explore the property with buildings and grounds superintendent Gerry Blache. On September 15, Valerie Balint (program manager of *Historic Artists’ Homes and Studios*) will discuss how French “sculpted” the landscape here. Both of these programs require pre-registration via housatonicheritage.org/events/heritage-walks.

DANA PILSON is a curatorial researcher at Chesterwood and recently curated the exhibition *Margaret French Cresson: Her Artistic Life and Legacy in Preserving Chesterwood* at the Stockbridge Library, Museum & Archives.

Photograph of Margaret French Cresson in an exhibition of her portrait sculpture, Chesterwood Barn Gallery, 1968, Chapin Library, Williams College, gift of the National Trust for Historic Preservation / Chesterwood

Endnotes

The title of this article is derived from a reprint of an article written by Anne Hard, “Talented Daughter of Famous Father, Marble Portraits Win Name for Margaret French Cresson of Biographer in Stone,” *Arkansas Gazette* (clipping in file not dated). The original article by Hard was “A Biographer in Stone,” *The New York Herald Tribune*, January 26, 1930, 16–17.

- 1 The exhibition was held at the Stockbridge Library, Museum & Archives from March 1 through May 30, 2019. It contained sculptures, preparatory photographs, exhibition catalogues, and memorabilia. Another highlight of the 50th anniversary is the publication of Harold Holzer’s biography, *Monument Man: The Life and Art of Daniel Chester French* (Princeton Architectural Press).
- 2 Daniel Chester French (DCF) in a letter to his brother, William Merchant Richardson French, July 4, 1897.
- 3 Margaret French (MF) to William Penn Cresson (WPC), Sept 24, 1920.
- 4 Dec 17, 1922.
- 5 MF to WPC, Oct 6, 1920.
- 6 MF to WPC, Oct 8, 1920.
- 7 DCF to Frederick W. Ruckstull, March 21, 1927.
- 8 *Washington Star*, Oct 14–19, 1932.
- 9 James Biddle, Foreword, *Daniel Chester French: An American Sculptor* (Preservation Press 1976).