

SARAH BERNHARDT THE VISUAL ARTIST

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This thesis titled  
SARAH BERNHARDT THE VISUAL ARTIST

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Sarah Bernhardt was a visual artist as well as a theatrical star. Both were important facets of her overall public persona as well as her considerable professional reputation. While much has been written about her colorful life in the theatre, her visual art has been almost totally neglected despite its significance.

This thesis argues that her visual art must be understood as having played a major role in Bernhardt's professional career, and was a key reason she enjoyed such long lasting fame and continued to fascinate critics and the public over several decades. This groundbreaking research uncovers much regarding her artistic career as a sculptor and painter that has previously been ignored, and establishes her as a performance artist who embraced the visual arts as a major element in the development of her superstardom.

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Joseph F. Lamb

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*To Richard (my Nunga), Ed, Autumn, and Theodora*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge Ed Moed for his sincere help and motivation, Michael Drew for his intellectual conversations regarding Ms. Bernhardt and her times, and Sharon Bennett, my voice teacher, for helping me learn “femme fatale” roles in opera. All three were intellectual inspirations for the completion of this project.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) is one of the biggest names in theatre history. Rarely, though, is she mentioned in the world of art history other than in passing. This is not surprising, since the standard practice (at least up to the late twentieth century) in the field of art history has been to overlook or forget artistic females. It was only near the end of the twentieth century that the sculptor and graphic designer Camille Claudel (1864-1943) began to receive the recognition she so deserved; it is therefore not surprising that Sarah Bernhardt's art was also pushed to the background. The female artists of the day who were recognized were usually affiliated with some specific women's group, but, as Sarah's confidante Louise Abbéma (1858-1927) surmised, these were women who were afraid to compete with men and who consequently isolated themselves. (Exceptions to this rule include the American painter Mary Cassatt [1844-1926], who lived most of her life in France, and the French Impressionist painter Berthe Morisot [1841-1895], but these women were a small minority.) Those few who declined to join such groups were subjected to public ridicule. Since Bernhardt was totally independent in the world of art and competed with men, it is no wonder that the *fin-de-siècle* world nearly forgot her art; yet because she competed successfully, winning a number of awards, she proved impossible to ignore completely.

Sarah Bernhardt was French, born in Paris on October 23, 1844, to a Dutch-Jewish milliner-turned-courtesan and an unknown father. Her mother had little interest in raising her young daughter. Instead, young Sarah was raised by a succession of nurses and eventually was sent to a convent at Versailles, where, despite being Jewish, she



vowed to become a nun. Eventually, though, she chose the theatre over piety and returned to Paris, where she starred in more than 125 plays, as well as 22 revivals of her most famous role, as Marguerite in *La Dame aux Camelias*. She loved playing male roles as well. She toured England, Europe, and America well into her seventies, each time to wild acclaim.

Her life was as melodramatic as the plays in which she acted. At the age of twenty, she gave birth to her only child, Maurice, out of wedlock. She adored her son, though his financial irresponsibility plagued her for the rest of her life. She was only married once, a brief union with Jacques Damala, a man eleven years her junior and a morphine addict who billed her for his many gifts to other women. Her younger sister, Jeanne, died of a morphine addiction, and the youngest sister, Regina, died of tuberculosis while still a teenager. Sarah herself had a gangrenous leg amputated when she was seventy, but she refused to let it stop her.

Nothing stopped her. She thrived on gossip about herself, and used it to fashion a very public persona. Her life was a great performance. She loved to break the rules. She wore trousers in public, had numerous love affairs, and even went so far as to play male roles--something that still turns heads in today's society, where we fancy ourselves so sophisticated yet cannot resist speculating on the sexual orientation of such transgressing performers. In Bernhardt's world, a world in which her friend Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was imprisoned for his homosexuality, gender and sexual norms were much more rigidly defended. Lesbianism was somewhat more acceptable, yet it could certainly still get people talking. Bernhardt capitalized on the sensational aspects of her persona to gain a worldwide reputation, and so became the first international multimedia superstar. Her

image, whether authorized by her or not, was used to sell all sorts of products, from bath salts and fashion to absinthe, which she herself detested. Although it cut into her own business of promoting her own products, this widespread unauthorized use of her image also acted as publicity, helping to ensure that she became the household name that is still remembered today.

Despite all her fame and recognition, Bernhardt's artwork was all but forgotten. Most of what remains is housed in the Musée d'Orsay and in various private collections, with the occasional item popping up here and there in museums throughout the world such as those in New York and London. All of her artwork is of a theatrical nature, whether or not it contains theatrical characters. Ophelia (see fig. 5) and Medée (see fig. 2) are actual characters; others are not. Yet the subject matter is resolutely dramatic. The tragic subjects and the supernatural way in which she represented herself give us a view into the way her mind worked. She was larger than life, and she knew it. Her artwork affords us a greater understanding of her obsession with death (which may be traced in part to family illness, including her own), and her sensuality and ambiguous sexual orientation. In her art, she loved to exploit the topics that would create gossip. Was she a lesbian? How many men was she with? Was her coffin really one of her favorite places to seduce her various lovers? Only she would know the answers to such questions. All we can do is speculate based on the all-consuming sensuality of both her theatrical performances and her artwork. One thing is certain: all of this "negative" publicity ensured her fame for her overall persona. She played the game, and played it well, despite breaking all of the Parisian rules of the day. Her life was a great performance art piece.

The art of Sarah Bernhardt was recognized in her own day with sculpture accepted by the Salon. Although she was an accomplished visual artist, time has erased this fact from history. Before the idea of women's equality began to gain acceptance, knowledge of the art and accomplishments of women of the pre-modern era was forgotten. Fortunately, many female artists are being rediscovered and restored to their rightful places in art history, and this facet of Sarah Bernhardt's persona happens to be among them. No single side of this persona can be separated. It was the true masterpiece. Her life was a work of art, and the visual arts guaranteed longer lasting imagery than the theatrical arts. Sarah Bernhardt, the visual artist, gained overall fame through sculpture and painting for Sarah Bernhardt the personality. It is time to give her the art historical recognition she deserves.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BERNHARDT THE ART STUDENT

Born Henriette Rosine Bernard, Sarah Bernhardt (October 23, 1844–March 26, 1923) began showing an interest in sketching early in life. But in her early twenties, before she had an opportunity to explore this talent, she became a theatrical star. When her performances at the Comédie Française became less frequent, she devoted her free time to a few watercolor paintings along with some crayon drawings. Her friend, the Belgian painter Alfred Stevens (1823-1906), happened to see her work, and he advised her to take up painting on a regular basis. Soon thereafter, she was going on sketching trips with the painter Georges Clairin (1843-1919) and the illustrator Gustave Dore (1832-1883). After a while, she began to explore the more serious art form of sculpture. Her teacher in this medium was Roland Mathieu-Meusnier (1824-1896), who was most famous for his dramatic sculpture *The Death of Lais*.

Following the death of her mother, Youle, in May 1876, Sarah Bernhardt chose two artists as her family: Louise Abbema and Georges Clairin. Louise Abbema was the daughter of a rich and distinguished family and was fourteen years Sarah's junior. She first attracted attention for painting a delightful picture of her family on the beach when she was a teenage pupil of the painter Carolus-Duran (1837-1917), a major portrait painter and head of one of the principle ateliers in Paris. Two years after this, Sarah posed for her wearing a trailing gown. This painting was shown at the 1876 Salon. This Salon

also showed Clairin's famous portrait of Sarah lying on the divan, along with Sarah's own sculptural group *Après la Tempête* (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. *Après la tempête*, sculpture by Sarah Bernhardt.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, *The Divine Sarah: A Life of Sarah Bernhardt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 133.

Clairin and Abbema were lifelong companions, and “housemates” from time to time. Cornelia Otis Skinner (1901-1979), who could not be accused of being fond of Louise Abbema, states:

Bernhardt’s taste in art was as haphazard as her taste in household decoration. It was the high noon of the Impressionists, but she had no interest in their painting. Instead she patronized the extremely inferior work of Louise Abbema, who produced pretty-pretty pictures on pretty-pretty subjects which were cheaply popular and, reproduced in color, sold successfully in the stationers’ shops. Sarah thought these embarrassing canvasses were just lovely purely because Louise Abbema was a good friend. Louise Abbema was also, according to rumor, an avowed lesbian, but such a defect of character didn’t bother Sarah in the least. Along with Clairin, Abbema became a fixture in the Bernhardt “Court.”<sup>2</sup>

There were also rumors of an affair between Louise and Sarah. Whether or not there is any truth in the suspicions, their growing intimacy did not go unnoticed, especially because Abbema was somewhat mannish. She wore a shirt and tie, had short hair, and proudly displayed her passionate dedication to Sarah. No one knows whether Sarah reciprocated this love, or for that matter whether or not Sarah was attracted to women. It was generally supposed, though, that Sarah was bisexual, since she liked to “play the man” both offstage and on, in spite of all her seductive femininity. At this time, the photographer who photographed her in her coffin (Melandri of Paris—active in the 1860s and 1870s) was now selling picture cards he had photographed of Sarah wearing her sculptor’s outfit (fig. 2). She had designed this outfit herself—a white silk shirt and trousers. She also “portrayed ardent, adolescent boys in *Le Passant* and *Le Mariage de Figaro* and would continue on her manly path as Musset’s Lorenzaccio, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Maeterlinck’s Pelleas, and Rostand’s L’Aiglon.”<sup>3</sup> This crossing of gender lines

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<sup>2</sup> Cornelia Otis Skinner, *Madame Sarah* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 95.

<sup>3</sup> Gold and Fizdale, *The Divine Sarah*, 134.



turned heads in her time even more than it would today. In Sarah's day men were men, and women were their delicate flowers.

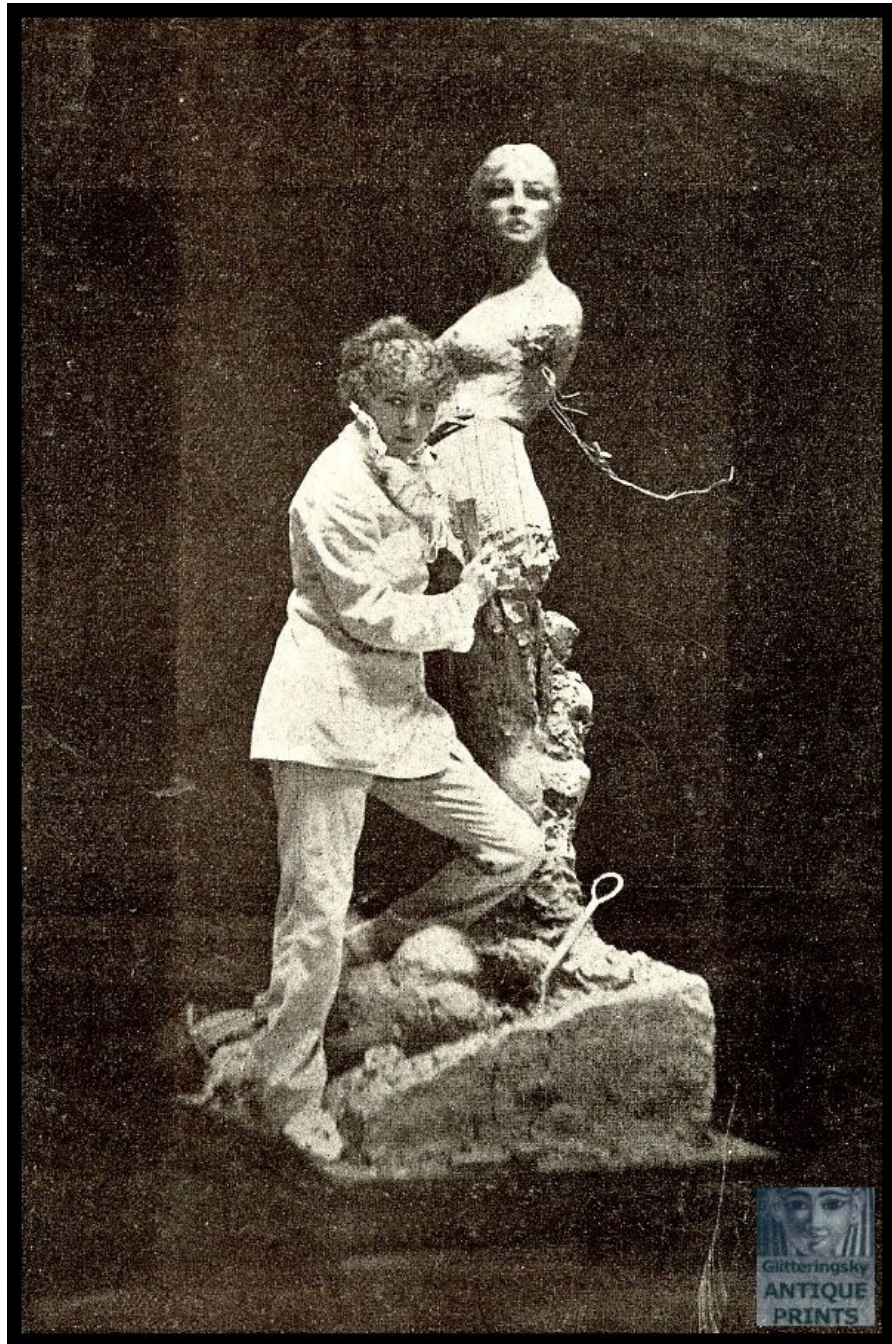


Figure 2. Sarah Bernhardt in her “sculptor’s outfit” as Medée.

Bernhardt was a highly debated subject, as the “masculine” Animalier painter Rosa Bonheur (1822-1899) had been a few years earlier. Bernhardt never painted the peaceful settings of fields of cattle, nor was she a minority as a female artist. Her circle rejected the idea behind the *Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs*, who had a reputation for dismissing anyone who would not join them. Instead, she preferred her independence with art just as she had with the theatre, and so became the focus of much gossip. Those who do not follow the beaten path must be cast out from normal society; and what better way to accomplish this than by the rumor mill? Bernhardt was not the only female artist to be ridiculed: she just happened to have the big name through her history at the Comédie Française. One can say, though, that she did seem somewhat androgynous in her sexual tastes, and she loved having “experiences” of all kinds, including such crazy ideas as keeping a couple of lions in her home. It seems safe to say that her sexual practices were not limited to the normal routines. “Such *roman-à-clef* as Felicien Champsaur’s *Dinah Samuel* and Jean Lorrain’s *Le Treteau* would have us believe she turned to women from time to time. Perhaps it was one of the ‘new sensations’ she had told Comédie Française actor Jean Mounet-Sully (1841-1916) she was always in search of.”<sup>4</sup> Whatever the status of their relationship, Louise Abbema remained her close companion for almost fifty years.<sup>5</sup>

As with Louise Abbema, meeting the painter Georges Clairin seems to have been part of Sarah’s destiny. Clairin had briefly been one of Bernhardt’s lovers, and then he became one of her closest lifelong friends. This seems incredibly obvious through the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



content of his work. In all of his paintings of Bernhardt, the look in her eye seems to hint that she is about to devour you in the same fashion as the lead character in Georges Bizet's (1838-1875) *Carmen* (which premiered at the Opéra Comique in Paris on March 3, 1875). His portrayed dominance seems to have bled through in the romantic yet domineering approach Bernhardt took to her own works. All of her self-portraiture depicts the dominance Clairin expressed in his representations of Bernhardt, and even her rendition of the dead Ophelia seems somehow sensual.

"His [Clairin's] was a salubrious presence; he was warm, cultivated, amusing, and, when Sarah misbehaved, critical in the way loving brothers are critical."<sup>6</sup> Sarah nicknamed him her "dear Jojotte." He has been described as an attractive man, tall and handsome, who had the *bonhomie* of a *grand seigneur*. He dressed the part of a painter, wearing the most expensive bohemian clothes made by the best designers, and was known to be a hopeless romantic. He was a favorite member of the Bernhardt "court" for more than forty years. Hardly a day passed without his appearance.

Sarah also had other artist friends, artists who also specialized in the popular art of the day, which has been all but forgotten by today's taste in art from the period. One such painter was Jules Bastien-Lepage (1848-1884), who created the highly reproduced profile study of the great actress with her hair flowing down the back of her neck, her throat covered in filmy ruffles, and a figurine held in her slim hands. She also saw quite a lot of the Belgian painter Alfred Stevens and the brilliant illustrator Gustave Dore. All

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

displayed a sense of admiration through their depictions of the legendary tragedienne. The theatricality of their works no doubt attracted her to their styles.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike with Abbema, it was widely known that Clairin and Bernhardt began their relationship as lovers. This romance was brief, however, and subsequently they became fast friends, and kept each other company for nearly forty years. In Clairin's paintings, as in Abbema's, there is an intimate quality to Bernhardt that differs from the theatrical portraiture of artists like Dore. There is a seductive air to both of their approaches to Bernhardt's full body expression. There is no doubt that she is the conqueror. Although little is known about Clairin himself, through his many portraits we have learned a great deal about the amazing Sarah. He represented her at home, in various roles and at various ages, through a series of drawings he made for her memoirs. Each seems to display Sarah as a grandiose figure, as though she was always performing. "Clairin painted charming scenes of North Africa, designed the decors for the first production of Bizet's *Carmen*, and decorated ceilings at the Paris Opera and the casino in Monte Carlo. The day he completed the best known of his many portraits of Sarah was the day he achieved mastery of a higher sort."<sup>8</sup>

Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale describe the painting (fig. 3):

The painting gives us Sarah seated on an iridescent, luxuriously cushioned divan, a plumed fan in her hand. She is dressed in a clinging white satin *robe d'intérieur* with white feathers everywhere, at her throat and wrists and at the hem of the opulent train that swirls down to the elegant wolfhound at her feet. She wears black slippers and surprisingly bright blue stockings that echo the blue of her eyes. There is no hint of the great lady in her undulant attitude or her inscrutable smile. Indeed, no lady of the faubourg would have allowed herself to be pictured in such intimate attire or in so inviting a position. But Sarah, beyond such

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<sup>7</sup> Skinner, *Madame Sarah*, 94-95.

<sup>8</sup> Gold and Fizdale, *The Divine Sarah*, 134.

propriety, plays a Parisian sphinx with more secrets from the world than the world considered proper.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 3. Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt, by Georges Clairin.

*Le Tout-Paris* is said to have gathered around Clairin's painting when it was exhibited at the Salon. All were enthralled by the vision that gazed out at them with urbane suggestiveness. Bernhardt's name was once again on everyone's lips, this time as the actress who had succeeded in winning the Salon's acceptance of her sculpture. This

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 134-35.

was no mean feat for an amateur. Also, her features graced the walls of the exhibition rooms in portraits by a young man and an even younger woman. Both were said to be in love with her.<sup>10</sup>

This seems to be the perfect time to bring up Bernhardt's absolute fascination with the idea of the *femme fatale*. There is no question that she fit the archetype of the alluring and seductive female whose charms ensnare her lovers with bonds of irresistible desire. She was the "bad girl." Churches even warned their congregations about her from time to time. The obvious obsessions of her two closest friends, Clairin and Abbema, seemed to amplify this idea. One of her most famous theatrical roles, which she brought back over and over for almost thirty years, was of Marguerite, the ill-fated yet redeemed courtesan in *La Dame aux Camelias* by Dumas  *fils*. After all, she was the daughter of a courtesan, and she never really knew who her father was. She herself was said to have an insatiable appetite.

It was about this time that the manager of the Comédie Française, Emile Perrin, was warned by Sarah's physician that her health was not as sound as she assumed. From childhood, Sarah had had health problems. Now, there was a possibility that she was consumptive. Although she was promoted to the position of *sociétaire* of the Comédie Française, the effort of performing Phedre proved tremendously taxing, and Sarah was forced to rest. She found time weighed heavily on her hands, and with her creative juices flowing as strongly as they were at that time, she cast about for ideas to occupy the hours.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 135.

She had dabbled at drawing and painting since 1869; now she decided to take up sculpture.<sup>11</sup>

Her sister and her friends became models for her work. A marble bust of her sister Regina was accepted in the Salon of 1875. Inspired by this success, Sarah decided to take lessons from the sculptor Mathieu-Meusnier. This was a very beneficial decision for the development of her sculptural style—so much so that in 1896 the Salon accepted a bronze bust and a small plaster cast of the life-size sculpture *Après la Tempête*, which depicted a sad story of the drowning of some Breton fishermen (see fig. 1). In the 1897 Salon Bernhardt exhibited three busts: one of Emile de Girardin, another of the vaudeville writer Busnach, and one of her friend, the painter Louise Abbema. Mostly, her work was on a very large scale, being at least life-sized. *Medea*, for example, was one such powerful life-size work (fig. 2). That her work was done on this scale suggests that she had assistants, just as other artists would have. She probably never did anything to the marble except touch it—the grunt work would have been done by people who have been all but forgotten except for the knowledge that large-scale works were virtually never carved out by the artist him- or herself. It would have taken many years for a single artist to accomplish what a team of assistants could accomplish in a relatively short time.<sup>12</sup>

Sarah was not pleased with Perrin's decision to give her a rest. She mostly blamed her problems on Perrin's favoring the stocky actress Sophie Croizette. Sarah herself explains problems she had with the Comédie Française:

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<sup>11</sup> William A. Emboden, *Sarah Bernhardt: Artist and Icon* (Irvine, Calif.: Severin Wunderman Museum Publishers, 1992), 28.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

It was then that I rented a studio to do Sculpture. As I could not expend my store of intelligence and creativity at the theater, I put them in the service of another art. I started to work at sculpture with tremendous enthusiasm. I quickly made great progress. I had become indifferent to the theater. I would get on my horse at eight o'clock and at ten o'clock I was in my sculpture studio at 11 boulevard de Clichy. My delicate health reacted to the pressure of this double endeavor. I vomited blood in a terrifying way and would spend hours unconscious.<sup>13</sup>

Tensions were at the breaking point. It was time for Sarah to either bow down to the Theatre or really turn her hand to another medium. When one is a great artist, one can adapt to the medium, so to speak. Sarah needed a change in order to create freely, without the petty bickering. Sarah explains further why she wanted to leave the theatre for the art of sculpture:

this confirmation of my strength rendered more painful to me the life of idleness, as it were, to which Perrin condemned me. In fact, after *Zaire* I went some months without major roles, performing in this, then in that. So, discouraged and disgusted by this theater, I gave myself up to my passion for sculpture.<sup>14</sup>

... I was making the bust of a delightful girl, Mlle. Emily de \*\*\*. Her slow measured conversation was very charming. She was foreign, but spoke our language with a perfection that astonished me. She was never without a cigarette and was profoundly contemptuous of anyone who could not read her mind. I would make her sittings last as long as possible because I had the feeling that this sensitive spirit could imbue me with her ability to see into the beyond. Often at moments of crisis in my life I have said to myself, "What would Emmy have done?" or, "What would Emmy have said?"<sup>15</sup>

After the death of her youngest sister, Regina, Sarah fell ill from the stress and strain of caring for her sister day and night combined with the sorrow of losing her. Her doctors thought it best that she convalesce in the south of France, but she went to Brittany instead. She brought her young son, her manservant Claude, and his wife. They stayed there for twelve days at Audierne, where Sarah spent her time making the dangerous

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<sup>13</sup> Sarah Bernhardt, *My Double Life: A Memoir of Sarah Bernhardt*, trans. Victoria Tietze Larson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 178-79.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 183.

ascent of the Pointe du Raz, swimming in the Baie des Trepasses, and, following a picnic lunch, painting until the sun had set. During this stay, Sarah became haunted by the story of the old Breton woman who inspired *Après la Tempête* (see fig. 1).<sup>16</sup>

The sensuality of Sarah's artwork spurred more gossip about her personal life, and the Abbema-Bernhardt rumors were reinforced by Sarah's own personal changes. Her sculptress image was accompanied by a change of attire. Photographs were taken. Being sort of a "pre-pop-singer Madonna" of her time, she began wearing trousers in public on a regular basis. This continued after her apartment was destroyed by fire. Some of this "public behavior" even took place in her own back yard while hundreds of admirers per day viewed her through binoculars. This worked well with her image of the "masculine" art of sculpture.

The famous Parisian photographer Nadar executed a portrait of Sarah with a terracotta bust of herself, and another of her working on a painting of the actress Rachel (1821-1858). She wore white silk trouser suits and matching shoes she designed with Charles Frederick Worth (1826-1895), the first fashion designer, in her atelier. These outfits became the butt of several cutting remarks from critics. Photographs of a woman in trousers were commonly sold as an item of scandal. Many artists, Bernhardt included, did not show her in trousers. In fact, Nadar himself published other photographs of Bernhardt in more conventionally feminine attire.<sup>17</sup>

These questions of sexuality ensured that Sarah Bernhardt remained a hot topic in the public discourse. Madonna did much the same thing in the late twentieth century. Both women used torrid public love affairs, public hints of lesbianism, outlandish

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 184-186.

<sup>17</sup> Emboden, *Sarah Bernhardt: Artist and Icon*, 33.

costumes, and so on to ensure that they continued to occupy a place apart from the rest of society. For her part, Bernhardt was a woman who went against what was considered proper public behavior even for one “liberal” enough to be an artist. There were many women artists during that time, so the fact that Sarah was an artist wasn’t the major factor—her public androgyny and bisexuality was.



Figure 4. Inkstand, sculpture by Sarah Bernhardt.

This intentional playing with her self-presentation and with the expectations of her public seems to have influenced Bernhardt in the kind of art she made. In her self-



portraiture, there seems to be a question of what exactly this creature is. The inkwell (fig. 4) shows Bernhardt as a sort of phoenix—perhaps an allusion to the fact that, no matter how badly the Parisian public treated her, she always rose from the ashes and returned even stronger than she had been before. After looking through many reproductions of photographs, paintings, lithographs, and so forth, one can come away with a sense that she was something of a Bacchanalian figure. She definitely had her band of Maenads (or devoted followers), both male and female. She did have the reputation of being the presiding figure over drunken orgies, madness, and possession. This power and sexuality seems to be clearly represented artistically in both her work and the work of others.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SARAH THE ARTIST

Sarah immersed herself in studies of sculpture. Even though the historical record preserved in such sources as art history catalogues reveals more about her paintings than about her sculptures, it seems safe to say that Bernhardt viewed herself as a sculptor who also did some painting. In her own discussions she always seemed to focus much more on her sculpture. She found modeling in clay to be a talent of hers, and she wanted to develop her abilities. She sought instruction from Roland Mathieu-Meusnier (1824-1876), a popular sculptor of the day. Mathieu-Meusnier specialized in storytelling tragedies or public-monument-type works, with his most famous statue being “the Death of Lais.” Reportedly, he took one look at Sarah’s sensitive hands with their long tapering fingers and told her they were created to caress works of art, thus pleasing her to no end. His desire to capture the moments of great tragedy no doubt affected the great tragedienne’s view of his artistry. She carried a bit of his style into her own morbid sculptures.<sup>18</sup>

Another fertile source of rumors concerning her artistic life was the intensity she brought to her studies. As was true for those who studied at *l’Ecole*, Sarah went to the Practical School of Medicine so she could learn to construct correctly the anatomy of her subjects. As did the great masters, she visited the dissecting-room and studied the corpses. She was rumored to have practiced the habit of prodding them with her parasol. At one point, she even managed to acquire a skeleton, which she named Lazarus. These

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<sup>18</sup> Skinner, *Madame Sarah*, 96.

investigations, unusual for a “stage actress,” resulted in far-fetched newspaper reports depicting sadistic experiments at home. These alleged activities included the decapitation of dogs, the burning of kittens, the poisoning of monkeys—there were even suggestions that Lazarus had at one time been the victim of her excesses.

Not content with merely sculpting, Sarah learned to paint, also through lessons from her friends Alfred Stevens, Georges Clairin, and Gustave Dore. She produced a fine likeness of herself, her favorite subject, which was exhibited in the *Nouveau Journal*. Her untamable red hair, aquiline nose, and closely set intense grey-blue eyes, always carefully lined with kohl, made a compelling subject for a self-portrait. As an expression of her taste for the macabre, and as a reference to the rumors of the woman who had been known to sleep in a coffin lined with quilted rose-colored silk, Sarah produced a painting titled *La Jeune Fille et la Mort* which was exhibited and engraved for the Salon folio. It was a painting of a young girl with the specter of death looking over her shoulder—bizarre for this period, especially for a woman. But certainly no more so than her later work, *Kiss of the Sea*, which depicted a girl in the grasp of an immense crab.<sup>19</sup>

Sarah was an apt pupil. She was quick to develop a facile technique. The sculpture she produced was strictly in the Academy style, following the vein of “Love Triumphant” or “The Fatal Reaper Cutting Down Youth” and other typical allegorical figures. Theatrically inclined as she was, it is not surprising that Sarah was so successful with this style. A high-relief plaque she had done of the dead “Ophelia” (appearing rather beautiful for being dead—more like a beautiful actress portraying the dead girl) was sold

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<sup>19</sup> Emboden, *Sarah Bernhardt: Artist and Icon*, 28.

by a representative gallery almost immediately after being exhibited (fig. 5). Her allegorical Figure of Music was eventually installed in the Monte Carlo Casino.<sup>20</sup>



Figure 5. Bas-relief of Ophelia, by Sarah Bernhardt.

Mlle. Bernhardt was so successful with her modeling skill and personification of the tragic that she won an honorable mention at the Salon of 1876 with a life-size group sculpture called *Après la Tempête*, depicting an old Breton woman holding the body of a drowned boy (see fig. 1). She received inspiration for this work while on a brief holiday

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<sup>20</sup> Skinner, *Madame Sarah*, 96.

in Finisterre after the tragic death of her sister, Regina. Every evening of this vacation she watched a half-crazed crone totter out onto the storm-battered cliffs and toss pieces of bread onto the churning waters below. The local villagers told Sarah that the poor soul had lost all three sons at sea. For a time, she had been left with one small grandson whom she had raised to be anything but a fisherman. But the lure of that life proved irresistible to the boy, so one day he set out in a rowboat to join the sardine fleet. He was never seen again. Day after day, for the rest of her life, his heartbroken grandmother came out onto the windy promontory to toss down bits of bread, calling out to the waves, “Take food to my little boy.” This was an absolutely perfect story for the great tragedienne to use as subject matter.<sup>21</sup>

Sarah also created busts of her two most faithful doters, Georges Clairin and Louise Abbema (the bust of the latter is currently housed at the Musée d’Orsay—see figs. 6 and 7), as well as of the journalist Emile de Girardin (1802-1881). Her study of the dramatist Victorien Sardou (1831-1908) was said to have been a striking likeness, and the touching head of her sister Regina, which she made shortly after the poor girl died, won a prize at another important exhibition.<sup>22</sup> She also completed a bust honoring Mlle. Hocquigny, the lady in charge of medical supplies for the hospitals in Paris during the Franco-Prussian war (fig. 8). The two had become friends after Sarah turned the Odeon Theatre into a hospital for wounded soldiers. Sarah’s description of the woman seems overly sensual, so much so that it is no wonder her communication with the woman ceased shortly after the bust was completed.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.bada.org/provenart/dealer\\_stock\\_details.cgi?d\\_id+379&a\\_id+3872](http://www.bada.org/provenart/dealer_stock_details.cgi?d_id+379&a_id+3872)

Like most artists, Sarah also experienced failure with her sculpture; and as one would expect, she found this quite upsetting. A well-known example of this is her portrait sculpture of Baron Adolphe de Rothschild. This multimillionaire had commissioned his portrait at a very large fee. He only gave her a few sittings, and Sarah finished her work in his absence. She then sent word for him to come see the clay model before it was sent to be cast in bronze. Rothschild arrived with check in hand. He took a critical look at the head, then asked bluntly, “Is that supposed to be me?” With typical dramatics, Sarah seized the check and tore it up. Then she grabbed her work and hurled it to the floor, where it shattered into a million pieces. This is not an unusual story—rather, it is a good example of how Bernhardt dealt with failure in general.<sup>24</sup>



Figure 6. Bust of Louise Abbema, Sarah Bernhardt. Figure 7. Alternative view.

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<sup>24</sup> Skinner, *Madame Sarah*, 97.



Figure 8. Bust of Mlle. Hocquigny, sculpture by Sarah Bernhardt.

The discriminating art critics and connoisseurs of her day never really took Sarah Bernhardt's sculpture seriously. It is reported that Rodin called it "old-fashioned tripe" while he was railing against its banality. (Ironically, the majority of the Parisian public was railing against his "immoral modernism" at this same time.) Her artwork is typical of the flamboyant type of art associated with *fin-de-siècle* France, as was the work of her friends and her teachers, abounding with references to myths and stories of the past.

There were also many among the public who resented Sarah's new extracurricular activities. "[T]he press for some reason took particular offense that a leading Comédie

Française actress should exhibit her non-theatrical creations.”<sup>25</sup> This attitude was at its most extreme a few years later, after she had shown her work quite successfully in London. The novelist Emile Zola (1840-1902) actually came to her defense. He was an off-again-on-again member of her coterie, since the two quarreled regularly. While they were on good terms, he wrote to one paper with his customary verve:

She is reproached for not having stuck straight to dramatic art...to have taken up sculpture, painting, heaven knows what else. How droll! Not content with finding her thin, or declaring her mad, they want to regulate her daily activities. One is freer in prison. To be accurate, she is not denied the right to sculpt. She is simply denied the right to exhibit her works. This is the height of farce. Let a law be passed immediately to prevent the cumulation [*sic*] of talent.”<sup>26</sup>

The passion with which Sarah pursued her sculpture and painting was certainly as intense as the passion she brought to her theatrical performances. This resulted in the production of forty major pieces. Emile Perrin, the director of the Comédie Française, was known to have lamented to the theatrical critic Francisque Sarcey (1827-1899), “I shouldn’t mind a *sociétaire* who sculpted in her free time. What I cannot accept, what distresses me, is that I have a sculptor who dabbles in the theatre if she has a moment to spare!” It seems that people such as he could have been responsible for some of the bad reviews of Sarah’s work. She entered her busts of Georges Clairin and Victorien Sardou in the 1876 Salon, and they won honorable mention. A self-portrait of the actress as a sphinx in the form of a bronze inkwell was given to a few close friends (see fig. 4). Another portrait of Mlle. Sarah was more enigmatic: it was a bas-relief in bronze of the Muse crowning Shakespeare and Molière (fig. 9). This work was based on a published

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 98.



drawing by Clairin. The drawing shows Sarah, in a flowing gown, stepping forward holding palms in her outstretched hands.<sup>27</sup>



Figure 9. Muse crowning the busts of Shakespeare and Molière, sculpture by Sarah Bernhardt.

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<sup>27</sup> Emboden, *Sarah Bernhardt: Artist and Icon*, 28-33.

an interesting point of view can be found in contemporary reviews of her art shows. She toured with her artwork so that audiences all over the world could see her artwork as well as whatever show she was starring in at the time. One such account can be found in the *New York Times* dating from Sunday, November 14, 1880. The article is titled “BERNHARDT AS HOSTESS—A PRIVATE VIEW OF HER PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURE Scenes at the Union League Club Theatre—The Great Actress in the Midst of Friends—Prominent Persons Who Were Present.”

The article offers a very detailed description of the whole affair. Bernhardt issued invitations to a private viewing of her paintings and sculptures at the Union League Club Theatre. The parlor at the rear of the theatre was converted into an art gallery for the occasion, and guests found displayed there a few examples of Bernhardt’s skill as a painter and sculptor. The theatre floor was cleared and across the front of the stage a screen of palms and other plants half concealed an orchestra. Around the orchestra rail there were more plants, and in the picture gallery stood an abundance of tropical plants and flowers in stands and vases, creating a bright and cheerful atmosphere.<sup>28</sup>

Another hand than that of the great tragedienne is seen in the bust of M. de Girardin; there can be no doubt of it, after comparing it with the “Ophelia” bas-relief, or the marble bust called “Regina Bernhardt” for uncertain reasons, since there is nothing queenly about it, and no likeness to the celebrated artist can be seen. If this good bust of M. Girardin is hers, it can only be hers in part and done while she was assisted by a master; in this instance only is another influence felt; of course, it may have been modeled under the advice of one sculptor or another, and possibly it was finished with the tool of Saint Marceaux in her hand.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *New York Times*, 14 November 1880.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

There is the obvious sexual innuendo. During research, this author has not found any references to assistants, yet it seems safe to assume that she did have them, as did most other artists. Not only did she probably have them, but they were most likely the doting artists who lived with and around her day to day. The article continues with more descriptions of the artwork shown during this particular American tour:

As to the pieces themselves, a characteristic bit is an inkstand, consisting of a kind of devil-sphinx, having the head and face of the accomplished actress. This *enerier fantastique* is so arranged that the animal-woman clutches in her fore paws what appears to be a large purse, while the hind claws seem to be tearing at it. “Primavera” is a statuette representing the star of the Comédie Française in a singularly imprudent position, especially as the name would indicate that it is Spring-time....<sup>30</sup>

The paintings are 15 in number. They have good canvasses, frames, and paint—especially plenty of paint. In a sense they are very characteristic, not characteristic exactly of the thing they represent, but rather of the person who did them....And although these pictures are full of their graceful maker, yet it would be a mistake to suppose that Mlle. Bernhardt has introduced a new species of art among us. The market is already drugged with figure pictures of the same school....Taken as a whole, these 15 paintings and 6 statuettes enforce the fact that Mlle. Bernhardt is a very clever woman; on their native heath she can teach the Americans a thing or two in advertising....<sup>31</sup>

This is very true of her entire career. Bernhardt seems never to have allowed an “unauthorized” image to be seen publicly—everything had a reference to her greatness. Most portraits, whether photographs or paintings, were of very theatrical poses, often depicting her with her arms reaching upward and outward. She showed herself in her most famous theatrical poses, thus enticing those who had not seen her theatrical productions to finally come and see her in action. This overtly sexual superstar would undoubtedly shock most people, and in the process would also be seen as very enticing, just as the modern-day pop-singer Madonna did with her sex book.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Another American view is that of Henry James (1843-1916), who lived in Paris for a time in his early thirties. James sent impressions of Parisian life to the New York *Tribune* in a series of “letters” that were later published in a volume titled *Parisian Sketches*. In his review of the Paris Salon of 1876 (dated May 6), he seemed unimpressed with Bernhardt’s work and with the work she inspired:

A work which has at the least its share of gazers is a huge representation, by M. Clairin, of Mlle. Sarah Bernhardt, the bright particular star of the Comédie Française. Considering the very small space which this young lady takes up in nature—her thinness is quite phenomenal—she occupies a very large one at the Salon. M. Clairin’s portrait is vast and superficially brilliant, but really, I think, not above mediocrity. There is a remarkable white satin wrapper, in which the actress, who is lolling on a sort of oriental divan, is twisted and entangled with something of her peculiar snake-like grace, and which shines from afar; and there are draperies and plants and rugs, and a great deerhound. The only thing wanting is Mlle. Bernhardt herself. She is wanting even more in her second portrait, by Mlle. Louise Abbema, in which she is standing, in a black walking dress; and in this almost equally large work there are no accessories, good or bad, to make up for the deficiency.... Not to be utterly incomplete I must say that Mlle. Sarah Bernhardt, the actress, has a huge group of an old peasant woman holding in her lap, in a frenzied posture, the body of her drowned grandson. The thing is extremely amateurish, but it is surprisingly good for a young lady whom the public knows to draw upon her artistic ingenuity for so many other purposes.

Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale believe that if he saw it, James probably preferred the portrait of Bernhardt done the previous year by the Parisian painter Philippe Parrot (1831-1894) (see fig. 10). There is no “hothouse atmosphere, no ‘deerhound’ to complete the serpentine curve of her dress, no pretty foot clad in blue to admire.” Sarah by Parrot is inward-looking, a young woman uncertain of her future; Sarah by Clairin is a confident adventuress, ready to lead the world by the nose; and “both are true portraits of the 32

year old actress.” (In actuality, when James saw the show on May 6, 1876, Bernhardt was thirty-one years old.<sup>32</sup>)

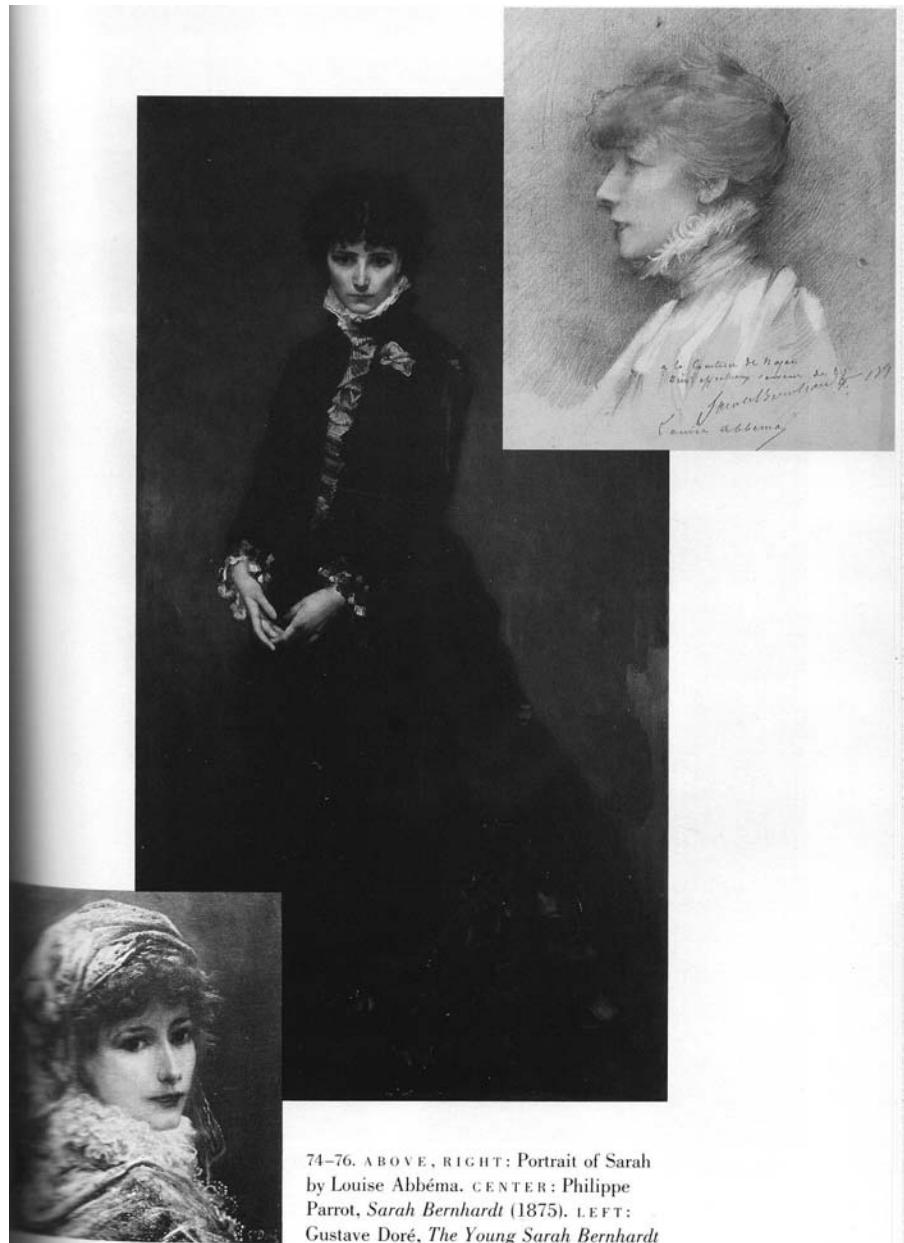


Figure 10. Portraits of Sarah Bernhardt.

<sup>32</sup> Gold and Fizdale, *The Divine Sarah*, 135-36.

Whatever any individual's response to her artwork might have been, Sarah Bernhardt has earned her place in art history as well as theatre history. Of itself and for its impact and import in the context of her times, Bernhardt's work deserves to be recognized in all the media in which she produced it. She studied with extreme intensity; she brought fierce dedication to her work; and its quality was recognized in the many awards she received for it. She retained her hold on the public imagination through the decidedly sexual nature of her presentation, both as model and as creator—a presentation that is consistent throughout her work. She always seems about to devour the viewer, both in her own self-portraiture and in others' portraits of her. This is, after all, the first woman to play numerous male roles in the theatre, with never a moment's hesitation during love scenes. This self-confidence bordering on outrageousness is also apparent in her art. Who else would depict him- or herself crowning both Shakespeare and Molière, as if their plays were less than perfect until she came around? She was the phoenix that kept coming back stronger after each and every public scandal.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### LIVING AS AN ARTIST

When Bernhardt began her artistic endeavors, her studio was separate and at some distance from her apartment. She set it up at 11 boulevard de Clichy, and made the same bold effort to infuse it with her characteristic sense of *vie de Bohème* atmosphere. The Boulevard de Clichy bordered the Montmartre district, which was the center of high-spirited revelry in Paris proper; Bernhardt's studio, then, was at the center of bohemian life in Paris, with its casement windows looking out over the rooftops of the outspread city below.<sup>33</sup> Like her apartment, and as was typical of successful artists of the day, the studio was a jumbled mess of mismatched furniture, exotic wall hangings, and loosely defined *objets d'art*. One visitor even described it as similar to a salesroom prior to an auction—a type of comment often made of artists' studios of the time.

At times, she would receive her “Court” at the studio. In a way, her artistic side seems to have been more for show than for serious art endeavors, since location was an important part of it. At this location, in an attempt to increase the bohemian atmosphere, Sarah herself would brew her friends execrable tea over a gas jet. Her reliability, however, was a bit questionable. As Cornelia Otis Skinner remarks, “As she was utterly cavalier about her social appointments, the ‘Saradoteurs’ never knew whether to find her here at five o’clock, or in the rue de Rome flat.” As is timelessly true of professionals versus partiers, professionals of Bernhardt's day would be unlikely to party in their workspace. Yet there have always been exceptions—consider Andy Warhol (1928-1987) in the late twentieth century. Like Bernhardt, Warhol's studio was famous for both the

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<sup>33</sup> Skinner, *Madame Sarah*, 98.

artwork and the parties. The scandal and controversy surrounding Warhol is strongly reminiscent of that surrounding Bernhardt, and in both cases the gossip spurred public interest in both their artwork and their places of residence.

Wherever Bernhardt was, the inevitable rumors began about her studio space. Supposedly, she would hold large orgies in this location. They were said to equal in immoral abandonment those of the *Quat'z Arts Ball*. Cornelia Otis Skinner points out, “The sculptress’ costume only helped to confirm belief in these stories.” This costume, like the tea-gowns she would wear at home when receiving her guests, was all white. It consisted of white silk trousers, a white satin blouse with white lace neck *ruche*, and an enormous student *lavalier* tie of white tulle. The idea that this outfit could be considered mannish seems quite ridiculous today, yet it was considered to be as scandalous as Rosa Bonheur’s short hair and men’s trousers. Bernhardt allowed a photographer to take a picture of her posing in her studio wearing this outfit. He took this back to his own studio, reproduced it, and sold the reproductions by the hundreds. Those in the upper echelon of the House of Molière were anything but amused. In spite of their disapproval, however, Sarah had become the most talked-about woman in Paris.<sup>34</sup>

The January after her return home from her trip to Brittany, Sarah became a *sociétaire* of the Theatre-Français, committing to perform for this theatre for many years. She began to regret this commitment soon after signing with them.

At about this time the building in the rue de Rome that housed her apartment burned to the ground; she and her son narrowly escaped the flames. Sarah threw herself into supervising the building of an atelier, a house with a studio, at the corner of the rue

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 98-99.



Fortuny (nos. 35 and 37), named after the Spanish painter Jose Maria Fortuny (1838-1874) in 1877,<sup>35</sup> and the avenue de Villiers. The new building would give her a large studio with floor-to-ceiling windows as well as—and attached to—the grandiose house that was the contemporary hallmark of the successful Parisian artists of the day. Of course, only the most successful artists could afford to build their own. The whole project was quite costly (over 500,000 francs), causing people to wonder where she was getting her money. She claimed that the money had come in the form of an inheritance from her great aunt; not many believed her. Her neighbors included such famous artists as Ernest Meissonier and his former pupil, Edoard Detaille, two of the most successful of the Parisian painters of the day. Other highbrow neighbors included Jean-Jaques Henner, the Hungarian painter Munkacsy, the highly successful sculptor Louis-Ernest Barrias, the successful painter Alfred Pierre Roll, Puvis de Chavannes, and Gustave Dore. This was also the district in which Bartholdi's "Liberty Enlightening the World" was constructed, rising high above the neighborhood before being shipped to New York.<sup>36</sup>

Sarah Bernhardt's place was meant to show her status amongst her neighbors and Parisian society in general. It was her masterpiece, intended to become the Hotel of Sarah Bernhardt. She most likely loved the intrigue created by her building this studio; thus, as with other parts of her life, this new building also turned into a form of publicity and a place to sell self-promoting "souvenirs" such as photographs and artwork.<sup>37</sup>

Sarah herself told the story of playing a trick on her aunt Betsy one day during the construction of her atelier. Her aunt was visiting from Holland during the production of

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<sup>35</sup> Milner, *Studios of Paris*, 178.

<sup>36</sup> John Milner, *The Studios of Paris: The Capital of Art in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), 171-81.

<sup>37</sup> Bernhardt, *My Double Life*, 185-86.

some of the murals. Sarah invited her aunt to dine at the unfinished house while the painters were working. In her usual provocative fashion, Sarah greeted her aunt wearing her “sculptor” outfit—the trouser suit. She shocked her further by inviting the “workers” to dine with them as well. In the meantime, all of the artists changed into their formal wear as Sarah herself changed. Only in the middle of dinner did her aunt realize that the company of artists were in fact the “workers” she had seen laboring on the house earlier in the day.<sup>38</sup>

In moving to the new atelier, Sarah was moving from the bohemian Montmartre into the most fashionable district of the city. Consequently, she was viewed as a *partier* by her distinguished new neighbors. She eventually left the atelier without selling it, and began another on the Boulevard Pierre. The house in Rue Fortuny was remodeled in 1891. No. 37 was demolished in 1960 and No. 35 was stripped of its *décor* in a public sale on February 28, 1970.<sup>39</sup>

Gold and Fizdale wrote, “In her free and easy way, [Bernhardt] spared no expense and ran up huge debts. All the same, her grandiose establishment was a sign of success and brought her happiness. Indeed, few things had given her more pleasure than watching the building rise from the plains of the newly fashionable Monceau district.” Sarah would climb all over the construction site, laughing at friends who were scared to death, joking with the workmen, and discussing the progress of construction with the architect. She thought the completed house was ravishing. It was in fact very typical of the architecture in vogue at the time. There were hints of Renaissance fortifications here and fairy-tale castles there. The interior was decorated with great enthusiasm by her artist friends,

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Gustave Dore, Georges Clairin, Louise Abbema, Phillippe Parrot, and others, who clambered up ladders and lay on scaffolds to cover the walls and ceilings with allegorical murals. The most amusing of these, Clairin's vision of Sarah as Aurora, goddess of the dawn, was ensconced on the ceiling over her bed and was surrounded by a host of her familiars disguised as mythological creatures.<sup>40</sup>

Typically, Sarah's atelier became a source of gossip. People fantasized about what went on behind closed doors based on the little they saw when they "spied" on her with binoculars in large groups from neighboring rooftops. Yet again, her "sexual deviance" was ensuring her fame; the salacious rumors spreading throughout the city made her atelier one of the hottest topics in Paris. Innuendo, rumor, and mystique combined to pique the interest of the public, and inevitably she sold more work as a result. Rumors of the activities that went on there and the craziness of her décor brought many into her studio, and she was such a powerful presence that the guests felt compelled to purchase something as proof that they had actually been there. We would most likely do the same thing today, and indeed we do, through gift shops and souvenir stands as well as through photography. People who visited Andy Warhol's studio, The Factory, when he was working wanted to come away with some piece of it; the same more than likely held true of Sarah Bernhardt's studio, which held a very similar type of intrigue.

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<sup>40</sup> Gold and Fizdale, *The Divine Sarah*, 139-40.

## CONCLUSION

Sarah Bernhardt was the *femme fatale* of Paris, if not the world. Her bisexuality and androgyny ensured her success as an independent artist. As with Madonna and Andy Warhol from more recent times, Bernhardt's scandalous behavior spurred public interest. Sadly, many extremely talented female artists have been completely forgotten because they were not so bold. Hopefully, these women will be rediscovered by other women who are inspired to search for them. These female artists who were pushed aside by the cliquish women's societies of the day did not stand a chance in their society. Bernhardt escaped this trap by using a combination of canny self-presentation, charisma, talent, and verve. This tendency to compartmentalize and marginalize female artists persists today, and many women suffer because of it. But it can be beaten, transcended, by the same means Bernhardt used. Madonna did it.

The tendency in masculine society has been to push the work of female artists to the background and to focus on their conformity (or lack of conformity) to conventional gender roles. Such has been the fate of Sarah Bernhardt's artwork; it has been all but forgotten. There are indications that this tendency is changing, though. During the 1970s and 1980s, more women artists resurfaced, as a result of research that did not limit itself to the standard paths. As noted earlier, Camille Claudel was one such female artist—all but forgotten until the late twentieth century, many years after her tragic life was over. Although Bernhardt's artistic style had none of the delicacy of Claudell's, she too deserves recognition for her work within the realm of art history. She was the first great performance artist to create a life as a work of art. Bernhardt defied those who would

have had her follow the beaten path, and she surpassed them despite their opposition to her independence. By touring her shows and her artwork, she defied the close-mindedness of the Parisian societies of the day. Since in foreign countries there was no institution analogous to Paris's Union of Women Painters to turn the public taste against nonconforming artists, her work was appreciated and evaluated on its own merits.

Moreover, she was a larger-than-life personality who had scandalized the Parisian public, and the world was more than ready to continue the fascination. She used multiple media, such as photographs, paintings, sculpture, poster art, etcetera, to ensure her fame. Those who were lucky enough to sit for her must have come away with the story of a lifetime.

Ultimately, though, we cannot assess Bernhardt's art on its own merits, separate from her canny self-presentation and from the titillation others felt when considering her art and life. And on these terms, whatever any individual's response to her artwork might have been, Sarah Bernhardt has earned her place in art history as well as theatre history as a great performance artist. Bernhardt's work made a tremendous impact in her time, and it deserves to be recognized in all the media in which she produced it. She was a dedicated and intense artist, and that dedication and intensity was brought into play in the service of a unique vision and talent. What was recognized in the many awards she received was precisely this combination of talent and effort. And while she retained her hold on the public imagination through the decidedly sexual nature of her presentation, the boldness of her artistic production deserves to be recognized as having stood the test of time and critical appraisal. Bernhardt was more than an actress who did some art--she was an artist in all that she did.

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