

ELISABET NEY

SCULPTING TEXAS' CULTURAL LEGACY



AS A GIRL growing up in the 1830s in Münster, Westphalia, Elisabet Ney loved to watch her father carve stone in his workshop. She dreamed of becoming a great sculptor herself. Her parents told her that women were not allowed to take sculpting classes, but Elisabet was strong-willed and would not give up.

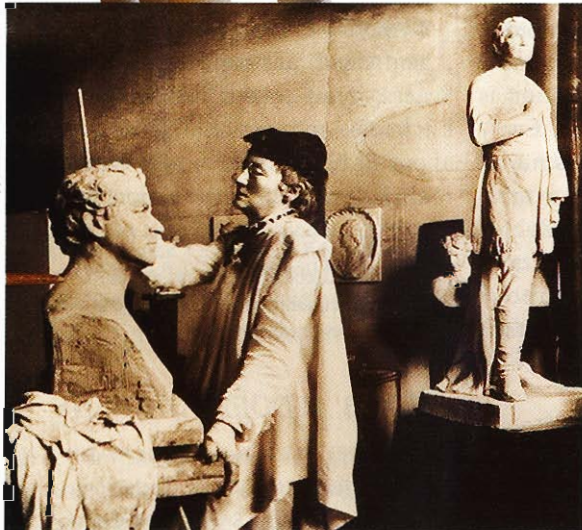
Still undaunted at the age of 19, Elisabet applied for admission to the Munich Academy of Art. When director Wilhelm von Kaulbach refused to enroll her (a woman would cause too much of a stir in a class of young men), she began training with a private teacher. Von Kaulbach eventually relented, and he admitted her to the academy on a trial basis in 1852.

Elisabet worked hard and in a few years earned a scholarship to study in Berlin under master sculptor Christian Rauch. He was so impressed with her skill and discipline that he introduced her to potential clients who were important political and intellectual leaders. She soon began a busy career, sculpting philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, philologist Jacob Grimm, King Ludwig II of Bavaria, naturalist Baron Alexander von Humboldt, Italian revolutionary Giuseppe

Garibaldi, and King George V of Hanover, among many others.

While visiting a friend in Heidelberg in 1853, Elisabet met a Scottish medical student named Edmund Duncan Montgomery. Ten years later, they were married on the island of Madeira, where Dr. Montgomery had a medical practice. (He had a studio built for Elisabet there, as well.) The couple (along with their lifelong Austrian housekeeper, Cencie Simath) later immigrated to the United States, possibly to escape the Franco-Prussian War. After locating first in Georgia, Elisabet and Edmund moved to Texas, where they purchased the once legendary Liendo Plantation near Hempstead in 1873. While Edmund conducted scientific research, Elisabet oversaw their crops and helped care for their two young children, Arthur and Lorne. Tragically, Arthur contracted diphtheria when he was not yet two, and he died shortly after their arrival.

Elisabet's new Texas neighbors didn't know what to make of her, because she didn't look or act anything like them. Instead of the tightly girdled long dresses most women wore, she favored loose, knee-length dresses with leggings, or a loose-fitting gray silk cloak. Tall and slender, her red hair was cut attractively (but unconventionally) short. What really caused tongues to wag, however, was Elisabet's choice to keep her own last name. Because of this, her neighbors



BY JAN BURNS

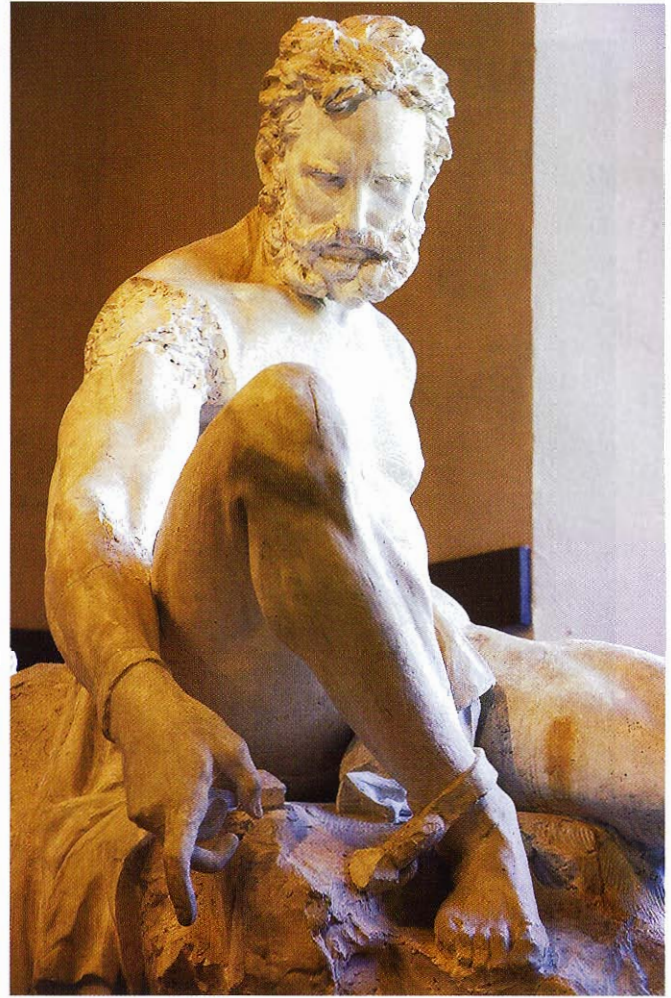
PHOTOGRAPHS BY AL BRADEN

Above, sculptor Elisabet Ney works on a bust of presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan in 1899 (her statue of Sam Houston stands behind her). Top, *Sursum (Genii of Mankind)* depicts two boys helping each other walk up a hill. Latin for "upwards," *Sursum* became Elisabet's lifelong motto and belief that people must help each other reach a higher plane. Many experts consider *Lady Macbeth* (facing page) Elisabet's greatest work.





Elisabet's neo-classic-gothic studio/home in Austin is now the Elisabet Ney Museum. The National Trust for Historic Preservation calls the museum "One of the most significant historic artists' homes and studios in the country." Elisabet's *Prometheus Bound* (right) was sculpted in 1865 in an Austrian castle.



believed that she and Edmund had never married—quite scandalous for the time.

For some 20 years, Elisabet tended to the affairs of her family and the plantation. In the early 1880s, though, Texas Governor Oran Roberts, who had become a family friend, invited Elisabet to Austin to ask her advice about providing sculptural decoration for the new State Capitol. And in 1892, Texas members

with large windows that could swing open to accommodate large statuary. The exterior was rough-hewn limestone, which Elisabet felt lent the structure a natural feel. Elisabet also built a barn for her beloved horse. She

SHE HAD CREATED THE PORTRAITS TO BE THE EXACT HEIGHT OF EACH MAN... HOUSTON WAS SIX FEET, TWO INCHES TALL, WHILE AUSTIN WAS FIVE FEET, SEVEN INCHES TALL. SOME CRITICS COMPLAINED THAT SHE SHOULD HAVE MADE THEM THE SAME SIZE.

of the World's Fair Exhibit Association asked her to sculpt portraits of Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin to represent the state at the World Columbian Exposition, to be held in Chicago the following year. Elisabet, now 59 years old, had done little sculpting for almost two decades, but she agreed to create the statues and started making plans to revive her career.

Elisabet had a studio built in the Hyde Park section of Austin. She designed it with niches for decorative statuary on both sides of the entrance. A classically designed, gabled portico led directly into the studio, which was a high, open area

left her four-acre landscape in its natural state of Texas prairie grasses and wildflowers. She named her studio *Formosa*, meaning "beautiful" in Portuguese, after the studio Edmund had built for her on Madeira.

To create likenesses of Houston and Austin, Elisabet asked their relatives to lend her pictures, engravings, and other items that had belonged to the men. Margaret Houston Williams lent Elisabet her father's sword. Guy Bryan, Austin's nephew, sent her an engraving of Austin that had been based on an 1835 painting. He also wrote for Elisabet detailed descriptions of his uncle. These and other

personal items and reminiscences helped her visualize how to represent the two Texas heroes.

She started Houston's statue first, sculpting him in a fringed frontier buckskin suit and reproducing his sword in detail at his side, calling it a symbol of a soldier's strength and power. Since Sam often wore an Indian blanket, she found one of similar age and style and molded a likeness of it draped over his left shoulder.

The required art supplies took longer to arrive than Elisabet had anticipated, so she was able to complete only Houston's statue in time for the Chicago Exposition. The likeness turned out to be one of the fair's most popular exhibits.

After the exposition, Elisabet returned to *Formosa* and began Stephen F. Austin's statue. She sculpted him in buckskin also, because that was what he had worn when he traveled to Texas to carry out his dying father's wish that he establish colonies here. Elisabet put a map in his



Marble versions of Elisabet's sculptures of Sam Houston (on the left) and Stephen F. Austin adorn the Texas Capitol (above) and the National Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol. The original plaster works—commissioned for the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago—reside at the Elisabet Ney Museum.

hands, perhaps of the territory he hoped to settle.

The Texas Legislature later approved the funds to create marble versions of the two statues (the original works were made of plaster). In early 1903, these marble likenesses were placed in the State Capitol, and later, two other marble statues went to the National Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol, where they remain today. As with many of her sculptures, Elisabet kept the original casts.

She had created the portraits to be the exact height of each man, excluding the bases and pedestals. Houston was six feet,

two inches tall, while Austin was five feet, seven inches tall. Some critics complained that she should have made them the same size. Elisabet supposedly responded that, "God almighty makes men. I only copy his handiwork. I suggest you take your complaint to God."

Many people wanted to meet this witty, celebrated woman from Europe, and Formosa became a gathering place for friends, artists, and patrons of the arts. Elisabet loved to talk about the importance of having a place for the arts in Texas frontier life.

After the statues' successful completion,

Elisabet began receiving more orders for her work. The Texas Legislature appropriated funds to honor politicians through busts and statues, as well as to create a memorial to General Albert Sidney Johnston at his grave in the State Cemetery. She created other pieces for University of Texas honorees and for family, friends, and benefactors. In 1902, she added additional studio and living space, a tower, and a balcony to Formosa.

Elisabet suffered a heart attack in May 1907, and she died a month later. After her death, her friend Ella Dancy Dibrell purchased Formosa from Edmund, and

NEY IN TEXAS

THE ELISABET NEY MUSEUM is at 304 E. 44th St. in Austin; 512/458-2255; www.elisabetsneymuseum.org. Hours: Wed-Sat 10-5, Sun 12-5. Admission: Free. Guided tours by reservation. The museum offers educational programs, exhibits, workshops, and lectures throughout the year. More than 70 of Ney's works (on loan from the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas) are exhibited in the museum. Other exhibits include a step-by-step breakdown of Ney's sculpture process and a large-format photographic exhibit of 7 homes and studios she created in Europe and America.



Owned by the City of Austin, the Elisabet Ney Museum is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and also is a city and state historical landmark, and a member of Historic Artists' Homes and Studios, a program of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

OTHER SITES in Austin that hold one or more of Elisabet's works include the Texas State Capitol building (call the State Preservation Board at 512/463-5495; www.tspb.state.tx.us); The Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum (512/936-8746; www.thestoryoftexas.com); and UT's Center for American History (512/495-4515; www.cah.utexas.edu). The Texas State Cemetery (including Elisabet's memorial to Albert Sidney Johnston) is at 7th and Comal streets.

The Children's Nutrition Research Center is on the southwest side of the Texas Medical Center in Houston (1100 Bates St.); 713/798-6767; www.kidsnutrition.org.

Elisabet's and Edmund's gravesites are at Liendo Plantation (near Hempstead), which opens for tours the first Sat. of the month. Call 979/826-3126; www.liendo.org.



During a class tour of the museum, Dr. Louis Waldman, an art history professor at the University of Texas, discusses a bust of Dr. Edmund Montgomery with Marcia Tugendhat. (A bust of Elisabet is on the right.)

together with Elisabet's friends and admirers, she turned the studio/home into the Elisabet Ney Museum and the Texas Fine Arts Association. At Elisabet's request, Edmund donated her portraits and memorabilia to the University of Texas, stipulating that the collection remain in Fortmosa as long as the studio continued to be a museum dedicated to his wife's memory. He died in 1911.

proud of her *Lady Macbeth* figure. Even from across the room, it commands attention because of the strong emotion conveyed by the subject's rigid, wrenched hands and intense, beseeching look. This was one of Elisabet's last works, finished in 1905 when she was more than 70 years old. So that she could capture the exact look and the proportions she wanted, she used different women to model the arms and shoulders, body, face, hands, and feet.

She sculpted the piece from a pure white block of marble from Seravezza, Italy, a site near Carrara, the source of marble used by Michelangelo. The marble version of *Lady Macbeth* is at the National Museum of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. (the one you'll see at the Elisabet Ney Museum is made of plaster).

Visitors can also see sculptures of Ney's surviving son, Lorne (with whom she had a strained relationship); of her husband, Edmund, with his mutton-chop sideburns; and of judge and friend Governor Oran Roberts. Also displayed is *Sursum* (Latin for "upwards")—her piece showing two children striding together—which was of particular importance to Elisabet and Edmund.

TODAY, visitors to the Elisabet Ney Museum in Austin can view dozens of the artist's plaster models, marble busts, and portraits of European dignitaries sculpted from life. The larger pieces include a life-size likeness of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, which stands near the entrance. That the eccentric Ludwig had agreed to have her sculpt him at all was a tribute to Elisabet's artistic reputation and persistence. During the tedious sittings, he became bored so easily that she dressed as a character from one of his favorite plays and recited lines to entertain him.

Another large work, *Prometheus Bound* sprawls in front of a back window. Pools of light fall onto the huge, muscled figure straining at the chains that bind him to a rock. Elisabet had sculpted this piece in an Austrian castle and left it behind when she moved to Texas. Many years later, she tracked it down and brought it to Texas.

Most of the sculptures on exhibit were created in Texas. Elisabet was particularly

Various pieces of Elisabet's sculpture are also on display at the Center for American History in Austin. Sam Houston (in plaster) is at the Bob Bullock State History Museum in Austin, and a bronze copy of *Sursum* is at the Children's Nutrition Research Center in Houston. Also, a marble, whimsical, winged cherub sculpted by Elisabet adorns the gravestone for early German settler Elisabeth Emma Schnerr in Der Friedhof, Fredericksburg's oldest cemetery. Other Ney sculptures are in Europe.

As a young woman, Elisabet had stated that she wanted to meet the great people of the world. Thanks to her spirit, determination, and talent, she realized that dream, and many of the world's distinguished personalities live on through her works. ★

Freelance writer JAN BURNS lives in Lake Jackson. This is her first story for *Texas Highways*.

This is also AL BRADEN'S first feature assignment for *TH*. To see more of his work, go to www.albradenphoto.com.