



## 40: Abastenia St. Leger Eberle *Windy Doorstep* (1910)

Pamela W. Blanpied

The woman sweeping the windy doorstep is vigorously engaged in her task. She grips the broom purposefully, leaning into her work. This is no romantic ideal of domesticity. It is an image of one mature young woman, thoroughly involved in the work of a familiar, useful task. The high-cheek-boned face, the fingers, the worn stone slab are specific. She has her sleeves rolled to her elbows; she's wearing sturdy boots. Her head, her skirt, her back, and the broom flare beyond the doorstep. The wind blows the tails of the kerchief tied around her head and lifts the corners of her apron away from the skirt. It presses her dress against her side and back, revealing the body: the half-crouch, the musculature of the back, the force of the shoulders, the shapes of the legs as they carry the weight from the lifted right heel to the ball of the left foot.<sup>1</sup>

Abastenia Eberle<sup>2</sup> created this piece at her cottage in Woodstock, New York, in 1910, using a local woman as a model. "I remember thinking about the idea [of sweeping] continually when walking about New York and later I modeled it in Woodstock. Every farmer's wife I knew was arguing about how to sweep properly,"<sup>3</sup> In time she came to understand that this statue "was the expression of a subjective reality—though I myself was not aware of it at the time. Later I realized why the idea of 'sweeping something out' had been so insistent."<sup>4</sup>

By 1910 Eberle was well along in a personal transition that in some ways mirrored the large forces moving in the art community and in the world beyond it. She had come to New York in 1899, alone, with few funds, and twenty years old. She had very little art background; she was in training to be a professional musician. Until she was in her teens the only sculptures she had seen were cemetery monuments that "didn't fill the bill."<sup>5</sup> Until she came to New York her only formal work had been two years of classes at the Canton, Ohio, YWCA, where she had personally rounded up the requisite ten students so there could be a sculpture class. During the Spanish-American War, when her father was stationed as physician to the military in Puerto Rico, she modeled portraits of the life she saw around her in the streets there. When she could manage it, she moved to New York and enrolled at the Art Students League.

At the League, sculpture and life classes were segregated by sex, the first-year students drew and sculpted from Greek and Roman classics in the academic style, and her teachers and her mentor, George Grey Barnard,<sup>6</sup> were all rigorously traditional. Eberle obviously thrived on this fare, paying her fees in prizes and scholarships. But she remembered, "in those early lonely years in New York I would often stroll around the lower parts of town—losing my loneliness in the consciousness of all the pulsing throbbing life around me."<sup>7</sup>

With Anna Vaughn Hyatt (later Huntington)<sup>8</sup> she collaborated on at least three major pieces, Eberle doing the people and Huntington the animals. Gutzon Borglum, Huntington's teacher, urged them to submit their *Men and Bull* for the 1904 Society of American Artists exhibit, where it was greeted with enthusiasm by the jury, including Augustus Saint-Gaudens.<sup>9</sup> Their *Boy and Goat Playing* was featured prominently at the Society's exhibition the following year. They caused a stir partly for the novelty of their collaboration and partly because they were Americans. "Art students are wont to go to Europe for 'atmosphere,' to study what others have done, to try to learn to feel and think as others have felt and thought," observed Bertha H. Smith in *The Craftsman*.<sup>10</sup> The debate over European tradition versus "modern" American work was in full swing.

Abastenia St. Leger Eberle,  
1878–1942  
*Windy Doorstep*, 1910  
Bronze, 13¾ in. high  
Maurice R. and Maxine B.  
Forman Fund, 2004.14



Abastenia St. Leger Eberle,  
1878–1942  
*Roller Skating*, ca. 1906  
Bronze, 12<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in.  
Whitney Museum of American  
Art, Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt  
Whitney, 31.15

Within two years, echoing the divisions in the art world, the two careers went different ways. Huntington went to Paris to study,<sup>11</sup> Eberle remained in New York. “I do not regret the time I spent with the past,” Eberle said, “for it gave me a firm grip on form, and was of great benefit to me technically. It did not, however, stir me to individuality but held me within the confines of what was strictly traditional and academic.”<sup>12</sup> She continued to model traditional subjects, often in small, useful pieces that sold well, but her original interest in the ordinary people around her persisted and began to take on a life of its own. She had shown her Puerto Rican sculptures to New York galleries. They “were not accepted by dealers etc because they were not American—but no one suggested to me to do the same thing only of Americans and it took me five years to come to it myself.”<sup>13</sup>

The breakthrough came as she began to find interest for her small figures of the life of the streets in lower Manhattan. *Roller Skating* (1906), a wildly happy, poor girl, stockings falling down her legs, arms outstretched in joy as she flies downhill on one, crude skate, was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>14</sup> It was followed by the bent figure of the *Old Woman Picking Up Coal* and the exuberant *Girls Dancing*. These three began a flood of work modeled from

life amid the poor in lower Manhattan. “I broke away from the archaic and realized at last that right here and now, there was too much to be lost to my art for me to pass it by.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1906 Eberle was elected to the National Sculpture Society, only one of seven women since its founding. In 1907 and again in 1908 she went to Naples, where she could cast her work more inexpensively. The Italian foundry, never having handled the work of a woman artist before, had to be convinced that the work was hers and that she knew what she was doing.<sup>16</sup>

Eberle's return from Italy reinforced her interest in America and especially in the immigrant communities she had known and found so inspiring. She lived at the Music School Settlement on East Third Street for the summers of 1907 and 1908, and then in a small studio on West Ninth Street, in the midst of the immigrant community there. In her newly invigorated work, her subjects were increasingly women and children. She became active in the suffrage movement, organizing a show at the Macbeth Gallery to raise funds, and leading a contingent of women sculptors in the women's suffrage parade.

Though they showed their art at the same galleries and worked in the same city, even in the same neighborhoods, there is no record that Eberle came to her subject matter in company with or because of the group of painters known as “The Eight,” in the sensational 1908 exhibit at the Macbeth Gallery, the core of what later came to be called the “Ashcan” school of urban realism.<sup>17</sup> Like her contemporaries Jerome Myers and Mahonri Young,<sup>18</sup> she seems to have made her own way into her true interest and to have worked independently. Though she was an admirer of Jane Addams, and was eager “to give help when I could and where I felt the need,”<sup>19</sup> Eberle's work does not concentrate on that need. Most often her people are lively, vigorous, and unsubdued by their living conditions. Alexis L. Boylan suggests that Eberle's work was not principally “part of the socially progressive agenda pursued by Ashcan school artists.... Her challenge as an artist, Eberle held, was to harness the beauty and the thirst for life that was hidden behind the shabby facades of her neighborhood.”<sup>20</sup> The woman who was the unwilling model for *Old Woman Picking Up Coal* (1907)<sup>21</sup> was poor, no doubt, and lived in conditions no reformer would tolerate, but Eberle's figure is about the bulky form and the reaching gesture. The role of the artist, Eberle told *The Survey*, is to be “the specialized eye of society, just as the artisan is the hand, and the thinker the brain.... The artist must see for the people—reveal them to themselves.”<sup>22</sup> According to the *New York Evening Sun*, “This is her way of helping combat the injustices and evils of our system. She does not preach, she makes us see.”<sup>23</sup>

In 1909 Eberle built a small studio in the burgeoning artist colony in Woodstock, New York. There in 1910 she modeled *Windy Doorstep*, the woman sweeping with the wind so all the accumulated debris is blown far away. It became one of her most successful pieces. At the National Academy of Design exhibition in 1910 it won the Helen Foster Barnett Prize for the best sculpture by an artist under thirty-five. It was purchased by four museums.<sup>24</sup> By April 1917, fifteen copies of the edition of twenty had been sold.<sup>25</sup>



During the ten years following the success of *Windy Doorstep* Eberle's career flourished. She had two pieces in the groundbreaking Armory Show, *Girls Wading* (a group of three also called *Coney Island*) and *White Slave*, an adolescent, naked girl, cringing, clutched by a grotesque, gesticulating old man who is auctioning her into prostitution. She had worked on this piece in 1909, but set it aside, thinking it would be received "as an unwelcome effort toward sensationalism."<sup>26</sup> It was passed by in the general melée of the show but later, when *The Survey* pictured this sordid scene on the cover of the May 13, 1913, volume, it caused an outrage.<sup>27</sup>

In 1920 she was elected to the National Academy of Design and a year later the Macbeth Gallery gave her a one-artist show. But by this time, the ill health that had begun to plague her in 1915 took hold and her heart was too weak to continue. At forty-three, she was forced to retire, working only when she had the strength and the means to hire help for the heavy work sculpture demands. She died in 1942.

Abastenia St. Leger Eberle,  
1878–1942  
*Windy Doorstep*, (back) 1910  
Bronze, 13¼ in. high  
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In 1913 when her work and health were thriving, a friend gave her a teacart to commemorate many pleasant afternoons in the studio. The next day, certain she was getting too comfortable, Eberle moved to the heart of the Lower East Side, taking two rooms on the top floor of a tenement on Madison Street under the Manhattan Bridge. One room was a studio strewn with toys and music for the neighborhood children who came to listen to her stories. She sketched them in clay as they played. These figures of neighborhood life are the work that has begun to be rediscovered in the last twenty years: *Ragtime*, *Yetta and the Cat*, *Wake Up*, *Unemployed*, *Shy*, *Dance of the Ghetto Children*. The energy and beauty of these small figures show what she admitted to Robert McIntyre in 1913: "I have always had a strong taste for life."<sup>28</sup>

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