MEMOIRS

Penelope Jencks's Eleanor Roosevelt

BY ELEANOR MUNRO

One day in the near future, after it has been cast in bronze, patinated, joined to its granite support, and conveyed to Manhattan, Penelope Jencks's memorial sculpture of Eleanor Roosevelt will be installed in its permanent standing-place, a ring of meadowgrass and pin oaks by Riverside Park on the city's West Side. At its back then will be the Hudson River, the Palisades, and sunset. It will face sunrise and the East-West streets and North-South avenues of New York. So the eight-foot-tall figure will serve as a groman for the huge sundial that is Manhattan island and will mark not only the daylit hours but the months as the sun cuts its way from side street to street and the seasons change. Clever children will no doubt learn to tell the time by the shadow this great woman will cast as the sun drifts over her meditative head.

Jencks is a sculptor in the new realist style, whose earlier projects stand in New England, Pittsburgh, and Ohio. With this commission she enters a wider national scene. No contemporary American woman artist has been commissioned to make a comparable work, and in New York City, so rich in political anecdote and public art, only three free-standing sculptures have thus far represented female subjects. These are, ludicrously enough, Alice in Wonderland, Joan of Arc, and Mother Goose (a few works, mostly abstract, *by* women stand here and there, among them Louise Nevelson's "Night Presence" on Park Avenue, while a few nymphs and angels, sisters to the Statue of Liberty, add 19-century grace-notes to the city's bridges and office buildings).

The Eleanor Roosevelt Memorial Project was the brain-child of Herbert Zohn, a Riverside Drive resident and long admirer of Mrs. R., as she was often known to her friends. It was funded by members of her extended family and thousands of supporters including individuals, foundations, corporations and—especially likely to have pleased her—labor unions and The New York State Department of Transportation. The collective effort was, of course, appropriate, for Mrs. R. famously lent herself to many progressive groups in her lifetime. Indeed, through much of this wracked century of war and economic anguish, she served as a kind of enabling mother-figure for those who needed her, beginning with those "disadvantaged to the point of alienation from American society—the sharecropper, the unemployed, the Negro." Those words, from Joseph P. Lash's 1964 biography, may sound dated today, but conditions on some of New York's streets now are not so different from those in Riverside Drive's shanty-towns in the 1930s, and Mrs. R's iconic presence here in bronze should remind the city, the nation, and perhaps the world how much remains to be healed.

Yet Eleanor Roosevelt was also a woman of contradictions, loved and reviled, respected and ridiculed. For all her hunger for friendship and the power of influence, she held people at a distance. Her reserve, as recent studies by Blanche Wiesen Cook and Doris Kearns Goodwin have pointed out, stemmed from a troubled childhood with an alcoholic father and a mother who died young, leaving her daughter psychically abandoned until she made good women friends late in life. Even earlier, settled happiness eluded her when her marriage decayed into a platonic arrangement. But these hard circumstances were turned to positive good as she set about inventing an extraordinarily effective public persona.

"I had such a sense of identity with her," Jencks said when we talked in her Cape Cod studio last autumn. She was speaking not of background but of foreground style and ideas. Like her subject, Jencks is a rangy, willful, vibrant woman who speaks in self-assured gusts that give way to bouts of self-doubt. "Her background was so much more gruesome than mine, and she rose above it. I was moved and inspired and felt a personal identification. And her politics was part of what I admired about her."

Some of the interest of Jencks's portrait then, must lie in its contradictions. The image in the artist's mind—the maquette she offered the commission jury in 1987—was deceptively simple. It was of an older woman in impersonal, body-concealing clothes, leaning against a rock whose significance was structural but could also be symbolic. Clearly, to show a dynamo like Mrs. R. in lonely introspection was a risky notion, and Jencks spent a good deal of time debating whether to show her standing alone or seated in a cluster of children. She chose the more passive pose but sharpened it with a gesture which can be deconstructed to reveal several levels of meaning.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT BY PENELOPE JENCKS

The gesture comes straight from an early sculpture, a figure-group Jencks developed in stages between 1978 and 1982 and exhibited in several forms in Boston, New York, and at Brandeis. It includes a number of lifesize terracotta nude and clothed figures mounted in a bed of sand—in one case, lying in water—as if by a beach. Two middle-aged women stand among the young, one naked under an open robe, the other wearing a cover-all beach-dress. The latter leans her chin on one hand and looks into the distance in a way that struck one critic as "eerie . . . ghostly." The gesture, Jencks told me, "was one of those mysterious things that happen: when the model took that pose, it was right. It had universal meaning." When I asked her what the meaning might be, she answered, "if I could say what it is in words I wouldn't make a sculpture."

The theme of *Beach Figures* is a Proustian memory from the artist's childhood. Jencks is one of those lucky people who came to the Outer Cape as a child with her free-minded, liberal, somewhat bohemian parents who built a house on the remote, heavily wooded enclave of Bound Brook Island in Wellfleet back in 1939. In those sheltered but ominous pre-War days, passels of modernist artists—European immigrants and old New England nabobs, Jews and agnostical Christians, all sharing a German-Romantic arcadian philosophy and disdain for middlebrow lifestyles—swam, argued, and sunbathed, naked, on the Atlantic beaches of the Outer Cape. "In my childhood nudity was considered just regular," Jencks remembers. "We'd all go to the beach nude—such a sight! people naked on the beach had a feeling of rightness then. The sand-sun-nude-bodies seemed all of a piece. But there came a moment, when I was around 12, when I considered it complicated. To a child, your own body is normal, neat and tidy. But grownups are bigger. Floppy. Then you see ideal bodies in movies and so on, and you realize real bodies are nothing like the ideal. And you don't want others to see your flaws."

So the natural paradise, as we knew already, holds its germ of self-doubt, and much of Jencks' imagery has flowed from that remembered panorama of naked figures beset by brooding thoughts even in a pleasurable world. Expanding on Jencks' own words, I take it the gesturing woman addresses the tentative hesitation some people feel before display of mature sexuality. On another level, she and the other figures in their various ages and conditions suggest the realities of aging and the oncomingness of death. To these anxieties, the stable harmonies of nature offer a degree of solace, and Jencks' sand-colored terra-cotta figures rooted in sand surely suggest that for the thoughtful viewer.

It seems interesting to me, then, that these three linked sub-themes in Jencks's previous work should find re-embodiment now in her representation of a historic figure of famously

guarded sexuality, indomitable public presence, and motherly humanity. And the course Jencks followed in developing her portrait of Mrs. R. led, in a kind of parallel curve, from uncertainty and discouragement to understanding, a sequence followed more than once during the making of the memorial to Eleanor Roosevelt.

Jencks's family pioneered in that kind of persistent, sequential thinking. Her mother began her working life as a scientist in the Woods Hole laboratory of her father, biologist Raymond Pearl. After marrying, she made a conventional switch to work more compatible with childrearing. It was painting. Jencks's father was a pianist and composer, and a graduate of the Peabody Institute in Baltimore. He developed an obsessive way of laying out his music by measuring the seconds and nanoseconds between notes with a metronome. As a child, Jencks heard his note-measuring with awe at the same time as she heard him wish his music to be *natural*, "like the wind, the ocean. Like breathing. Though of course no one breathes in 4/4 time. Waves don't break to a metronome."

Penelope, second of three children (her elder half-brother is a scientist; her younger brother a well-known architect and postmodern essayist), was a delicate child who spent a good deal of time in bed, where she amused herself with clay and crayons and was read to by her mother from *Treasure Island*, *King Arthur*, and other classics illustrated by Pyle and Wyeth. Also, after taking her to one doctor or another in New York, Mrs. Jencks would hold out some kind of treat, a play or museum visit or, once, to young Penelope's dismay, a daunting pony-ride. To hear the daughter speak is to feel the mother's character, both women forceful and opinionated, both trying and failing, as daughters and mothers do, to balance love and resistance. "We got off on the wrong foot," Jencks once put it. "I may have made her feel like a bad mother."

Of regular schooling Penelope had little until she went to the Rudolph Steiner School in High Mowing, New Hampshire. There, for the first time, she found "a handle" to master her studies and, as it would turn out, her life. The handle was art history, especially Egyptian sculpture because it seemed real, not idealized. It seemed "natural." After two years at Swarthmore, however, she "got into a bit of a panic about what I wanted to be." Her mother was studying at the Art Students League in New York at the time, and Penelope was diffident about following in her footsteps. "I didn't want to be a lady artist. I had to prove I was serious." A move in that direction was a summer session with Hans Hofmann in his Provincetown school. That summer turned the key. "I'd never been in a situation where I felt such important things were being done. That he had the truth. I thought eventually I'd learn to do the things he talked about, but to get to that point I'd have to go to art school, learn to draw, paint, work from the model. In other words, I thought I'd end as an abstract painter once I'd learned the basics. But in fact I never did go back to Hofmann, never went back to the abstract mode." Instead, Jencks chose th art program at Boston University where she studied the gamut of academic painting: still-life, figures, interiors. In 1958 she married the painter Sidney Hurwitz and, over the next couple of years, began to experiment, on her own, with sculpture, making small clay works—heads, figures, even landscapes with figures. In sculpture, innocence was liberating: "I felt freer in sculpture because I hadn't really studied it. I found I could work more intuitively. I had the freedom to make my own mistakes."

Eventually she and Hurwitz settled in Newton, MA, and started their family. Her studio was in the attic of their house, and she had a small kiln in the basement. Like many beginners, she began in the shadow of artists she'd known, in her case Cape painters Hofmann and Edwin Dickinson and Boston sculptor Harold Tovish. But from the outset, her imagery was personal, and her themes and methods would soon focus and lead the way into a professional life.

Jencks started with studies of sleeping women and children, maybe because she liked their naturally relaxed poses. Around the same time, she made a series based on her own face in various contortions, like the work of the 18th-century eccentric sculptor, F.X. Messerschmitt. What she liked to catch were the physical signs of personality, a certain awkwardness, odd gestures, the lift of a hand or the special turn of a foot.

"Terra cotta interested me a lot then. At one point, when I was still working in the attic, I'd made a life-size reclining figure, too big to fire. Potters said I'd never be able to work it out. But I wanted to make the figures even bigger. If I'd studied academic sculpture, I don't think I'd ever have made the moves I did. But with terra cotta, I had to invent my own way." Her method at first was to build the small figures solid without armatures, then cut them apart and hollow out the cores so the pieces could be fired. The reclining figure became simply too large to take to the basement, so she took it apart and fired the elements individually. As the scale of the work grew, she began building armatures out of metal rods and wood dowels together with clay struts, then applying clay for the surface texture. Hunting for adequate space as the scale of her work grew, she moved to ever larger studios in Somerville and Cambridge. In 1975 she took a needed break from family responsibilities for a stint of concentrated work at the MacDowell Colony. She went back several times and there, in stretches of intensely focused work, really got her large-scale program under way.

Her first resolved works of the late 1970s were life-size standing women in floor-length, concealing robes and dresses. Their poses were relaxed and their mood uniformly bland, but the faces and hair were distinctly characterized, seemingly based on live models. In a 1973 interview iwth Marion Perry, Jencks explained what she'd been after: "a static, formal quality . . . very straight, ordinary, ungraceful, unflowing, flat-footed . . . whatever position [a model] happens to fall into." This static quality gives sculpture a monumentality which can contain either the restless gesture or the peculiar grimace. The contrast between the grim face and the contained form of the overall piece provides a tension I find interesting." One group of the women was shown at the Landmark Gallery in New York in 1977.

That year Jencks won a Massachusetts Artists Foundation Award, moved to a yet more spacious studio in South Boston and acquired a six-foot kiln. These preparations would culminate four years later in the beach-scene of life-size naked terra-cotta figures.

An artist's struggle to break out of confining old techniques can bring a birth of new imagery. These new images frequently stem from childhood memories which work to that point had failed to tap. The source of Jencks's new imagery would be those remembered summers on the beaches of Cape Cod. Compared to the early standing and clothed figures, these new ones, naked, would be "a little more relaxed," Jencks said. "Not so frontal, so Egyptian." For instance, the bodies of two young women drowsing in sand are twisted in a relaxed way, while another perches on a sort of pier. Other figures sit, lie and kneel in mildly oblique ways. Also, as we now know, the new group addresses a complex of moral issues. The new groupings of *Beach Figures* were shown in New York, Boston, and the Rose Art Gallery at Brandeis and caused a stir. In fact the tension between hyper-realistic anatomy and freighted mood was what aroused interest. Robert Taylor of the *Boston Globe* compared the work to Picasso's and mentioned especially the tall clothed figure—prototype of Mrs. R.—which "leans forward gravely pondering" the scene. Christine Temin in the same paper said how strange it was to see "real people, stripped not only of their clothes but of the dignity of the traditional sculpted figure." These sculptures, she said, "almost inspire fear. Instead of wanting to touch them, the viewer feels a strong desire to remain at a distance."

Other commissions for sculpture groups followed. including for Toledo, Ohio, in 1984 and Brandeis University in 1986. Then in the fall of '87, Boston sculptors Nancy Webb and Marianna Pineda urged Jencks to enter the national competition for a memorial sculpture to Eleanor Roosevelt. She did so, and in 1988 her maquette was chosen from 10 finalists. During the next year, while funds for the project were being raised, she met to work out details with the New York Landmarks Commission and Parks Department, and by July of '92 the contract was in.

For her proposal for the Memorial Competition, Jencks read biographies and Roosevelt's writings and visited the Roosevelt home in Hyde Park, NY. But she found a more telling clue to Mrs. R.'s inner life in Rock Creek Park in Washington DC, where Augustus St. Gaudens' haunt-

ing bronze figure, "Grief," marks the grave of Henry Adams's wife Clover, who took her own life. In his *Autobiography of Henry Adams*, the author wrote about the sculpture, comparing its overtones of perennial meaning with what he considered the vapid character of his world. In her turn, Mrs. Roosevelt confessed she often left the White House to spend time in the presence of that somber memorial. Jencks believes she sought consolation there and also courage to survive the kind of political and emotional struggles that destroyed Clover.

"I am trying to capture a sense of peace and strength," Jencks wrote in her proposal to the Memorial committee, "a brooding, pensive woman leaning against a rock, not quite seated, her hand under her chin (as she so often held it) gazing thoughtfully out into the park. In spite of her tremendous energy and activity, I believe that her true strength came from an inner searching, an almost overwhelming honesty, and a conviction that mankind has the ability (and desire) to 'do the right thing' if only that thing can be discovered. I would like to be able to capture this feeling."

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT BY PENELOPE JENCKS

That rock against which Mrs. R. leans, "not quite seated," functions both as material and metaphor. If it refers to Rock Creek Park, it must also represent the depth of mute suffering Mrs. R. brought to that place and the weight of resolution she took from it. The Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi once put it that "stone is a direct link to the heart of matter—a molecular link. When I tap it, I get the echo of that which we are—in the solar plexus—in the center of gravity of matter. Then the whole universe has a resonance." For Jencks, too, stone seems to have meaning as the revealed inner resonance of a figure. For her 1982 memorial monument to Samuel Eliot Morrison, which stands on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, she knew in advance what she wanted: "something triangular in shape, sloping down in back and cut off in front to suggest the coast of Maine, which Morrison loved." A 20-ton boulder from Westerly, RI, did the job. In 1986, for a figure of a student before the Farber Library in Brandeis (her daughter Erica posed for the figure), Jencks searched quarries and demolition sites around Weston, MA, and finally found the right seven-ton rock in the town dump. But the quest for the perfect rock-support is not always successful. For the Morrison work, Jencks told me, "the rock was the driving force behind the composition. I could take any rock and adapt the figure to it. But Mrs. Roosevelt had to dominate the rock, and I couldn't find the rock!

"I started looking in October of '92. Originally it was supposed to be of Manhattan schist, indigenous to New York. So for a while I stayed in New York in a friend's apartment and tried to track local rocks. I found out from the Department of Transportation where they were blasting. I got a guy from the Parks Commission to drive me up and down the Hudson River. I looked at rocks in breakwaters and out by the Tappan Zee bridge where big construction was going on. I took my sculpture stand, calipers, measuring stick, plasticene, and a calculator to figure scale: one and a half inch to one foot." That way, she could turn out small-scale models—"what I called rock portraits"—and from time to time, she'd travel to New York and try out the shapes on three-foot-high garbage cans. "But I couldn't find a real one."

By November, Jencks was hunting through quarries in Connecticut. "By then it was snowing. I cut the fingers off my gloves so I could make the rock-models. It was cold! And it was the hunting season, so I made a lot of noise, singing, turning the car radio up loud." After Christmas, the quest for the rock took Jencks to Western Massachusetts around the Quabbin reservoir. "It was fun. I trooped through blizzards, brushing snow off the rocks, measuring, measuring. And we found beautiful rocks everywhere, the ones taken out of fields in the early days for walls—subtle rounded shapes with lichen, patina, and so on. But then when I'd put a little figure of Eleanor Roosevelt beside those rocks, it looked like a casual afterthought, whereas I wanted her to look monumental.

"In the end any fool could see I had to fabricate the rock. So in May of '93, I abandoned the search and decided to make a plaster model and have it carved of granite. But then when I set out to fabricate the rock, I had trouble making a shape that was believable and consistent with the design. It took from mid-July till the end of December 1993, to resolve its shape. And I still wasn't building the figure."

In the spring of '93 Jencks had moved with her equipment to the Cape, ready to start enlarging the 30-inch tall maquette to its final eight-foot scale. "I wasn't worried. It had never taken me more than 18 months to complete a work. I hired my son Adam to help build an armature. We were enlarging with points and plumb lines, and building an armature for the rock too." That took a while, and in the autumn, Hurwitz had to begin teaching in Boston, so Jencks decided to stay. "I thought I'd be done by Christmas. I put in a furnace here on the Cape and stayed on alone. It was very beautiful. Quiet. I wasn't nervous, though it was kind of lonely. I'd grown up here, alone in the big house from the age of seven, and Bound Brook is a benign place."

Time went by as Jencks worked out the relationship between the full-scale figure and the maquette for the rock. By January, the full-scale wood armature for the figure was in place against the finished rock model and Jencks began applying a top layer of clay to represent flesh. "I thought I'd knock it off in a month or two. But then a new problem came up.

"I realized there was an unnatural configuration to the relationship between shoulders and neck. I tried to fix it by working more on that area. But I realized it's really not possible to sit the way I'd imagined her. It's anatomically impossible. Nobody is proportioned that way. Yet I wanted it to look natural!"

Early on, Jencks had accumulated stacks of photographs of Mrs. R. and pinned them onto big poster-boards, hoping they would make up for the absence of the living woman. The photographs showed Mrs. R. in all kinds of hats, wearing orchids, smiling, seen from the front, from the side. And her hair was dressed in all manner of ways. But these static, two-dimensional, black-and-white glimpses couldn't substitute for the coherent grace in motion of a real person, and Jencks began using models to help her correct errors she felt she'd fallen into by working intuitively instead of from life. A favorite presence in the studio in those days was Phoebe Roosevelt, whose bodystructure closely resembled her great grand-mother's. She and Jencks became close friends along the way, and their conversations helped summon the real woman into the studio. Jencks's daughter Erica was another good model. "She and I have a wonderful relationship. I love having her in the studio. I can work better with her there. Also there was my aunt! Her hands. She has incredible hands—thin, bent, expressive. And Erica's legs, ankles, feet. So by fall of '94, I expected I was done.

"And then, just about then, I got to a point and realized it wasn't at all what I'd wanted. I looked at the figure in its coat and it even looked a little like a turtle. I realized I was kind of *lost*."

Sometimes an artist's plan for a project simply dissolves and the whole thing falls apart. Then the most laboriously assembled details and procedures fail to support what once seemed the perfect solution to the problem. Most artists and writers understand this and know there is only

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one way out: take the project back to bare bones and its primal inspiration, and start again.

When I visited Jencks's studio in November of '95, the full-size, unfinished figure of Eleanor Roosevelt held center place. But in a corner, only partly covered in a dropcloth, stood another figure of uncanny strangeness and dominating visual power, also eight-feet tall but starkly naked, its bone-white plaster flesh torn and pocked as if by time or disease. However, save for the outer skin or clothes of the two figures, they were shockingly alike, each with the same narrow shoulders, heavy breasts, and unusually long legs and feet, elongations pronounced to the point of distortion. "The elongations and distortions came from the direction I was moving in then," Jencks said when I asked her about those features as they appeared in the Roosevelt figure. "I was moving this way at the time."

In fact, the figure in the corner is a representation of Jencks's mother, who died in 1992 of Alzheimer's disease. "My mother died in a nursing home," Jencks explained. "We'd had a difficult relationship early on, like walking on stones. But when she got Alzheimer's, we became so close. I'd done a lot of grieving, watching her slip away, and during that period, I decided to make the figure. She was the more visual person in our house, the more liberated one. It was she who went naked in the house."

The figure, so large and oddly configured, is meant to be seen as if "from the eye-level of a child." It is one of a new group Jencks started while she was waiting for the Roosevelt contract to come through. Eventually she plans 12 figures on the same scale, a group to "remind me of what it was like to be a child among naked adults."

By the time I saw the twin figures in proximity, a solution to the anatomical puzzles of the one had evidently aided in the solving of the other. But back in '94, Jencks's crisis of confidence had been painful. "It was an incredible cataclysm in my life. I decided the sculpture was really bad. I just hadn't done it. And to contemplate a second year on the Cape, alone in the studio, was too much to bear. The first year there'd been snowdrifts, ice floes in the bay. But this time it was very hard emotionally.

"Already, I realized what was wrong. I'd still been working out of my imagination, still working on the outer garment, the coat, instead of stripping the figure back to the bones. So the second year, I worked eight-to-10-hour days, trying to cram it all in. It became an obsession. But by then I was working from nude models. Working from the nude is different. There, I know where I am."

As it happened, with the nude model before her (and perhaps her mother's figure in her mind), Jencks quickly saw the problem. It was simply, as she put it, "the way the fanny is attached to the rock. I had to figure how to position the butt and the pelvis. I made complicated measurements and diagrams of the legs' relationship to the hips and the hips' to the rock.

"Step by step, I raised the top of the rock and tilted the lower hips and legs. One model's legs

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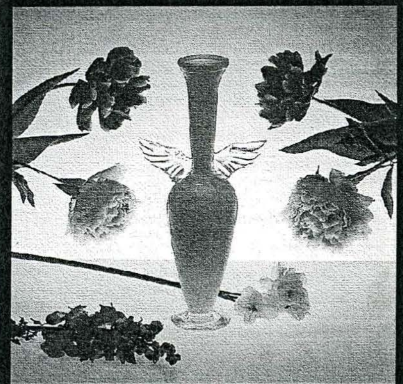

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fitted into another's ass and that into another's back. In the end, a young poet's ass served as Eleanor's. Finally, I pushed the butt forward, and it began to work."

Along the way Jencks even turned out a couple of test-runs of the First Lady stripped to a motherly combination of garters and underwear. These tender, not at all disrespectful, riffs on the dignity of high position suggest that the bonds between an artist, her subject, and her progenetrix, actual or cultural, will never be fully unwound. Simply, they exist in a continuity which, once understood, sustained this artist to the end of the project. Eleanor Roosevelt, perhaps mindful of her own sadly unfulfilled need for such a guiding influence, once wrote, "It does not hurt to worship at a shrine which is quite unconscious, for out of it may grow an inner development in yourself."

By the spring of '96, the full-scale clay figure was finally done and cast into plaster. Several months were devoted to fitting the plaster figure to the plaster rock, then making rubber and wax molds for the final casting, to be done at the Paul King Foundry in Providence, RI. Meanwhile, master stone-cutter Giuliano Cecchinelli in Barre, VT, set to work on the long-sought granite support.

Originally, Jencks had wanted the figure to stand inside the park, but the New York Landmarks Commission decided against borrowing from the limited acreage of metropolitan parkland. So the landscaping firm of Bruce Kelly and David Varnell, which designed the John Lennon memorial, Strawberry Fields, in Central Park, laid out the site at the confluence of streets, avenue, and river, in the same urban-intellectual neighborhood that nurtured many of Eleanor Roosevelt's friends in her lifetime. The sculpture's setting in that grove of pine oaks may remind some people of Cape Cod, from where the artist took her image. Others may think of the shrines of certain Mediterranean mother-goddesses, an insight supported by the towering but open form of the figure, which enfolds a matriarchal mythology personal to the artist but with larger resonance—trust in natural common sense to guide creative choices. For still others, the work may function as that groman I spoke of, focus for meditation on cycling time and the events of a century. There is no need to choose among references. All are authentic and add to the work's density. As much as any woman of her time, Mrs. R. embodied the archetype, and Penelope Jencks has given it living new form. ■

Eleanor Munro is the author of Originals: American Women Artists *and* Memoir of a Modernist's Daughter, *among other books and articles. She lives in New York and summers in Truro.*

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