

Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen (1868 - 1945)

Sketch for a sculpture of Queen Margrethe I on horse, 1897 Bronze

A tiny horseman is rare. A tiny equestrian statue making it all the way into bronze is probably rarer. By far, most riders are of considerable size—large person on large horse. And by far, most sculptures celebrating the combination of man and animal enlarge reality, too. In 1887, when Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen shaped a small Queen Margrethe I, the first of its kind on horseback, it was a double sensation. Needless to say, public space in the late 19th century was dominated by men: living, cast, and carved men. The idea of a mighty riding queen is just as excellent as it is radical and utopian.

At her own expense, Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen began assigning a spot for a woman in public space—that is, in its gazes and awareness, then, now and far beyond us. Bronze people live for a very long time. Margrethe I shall be great as the kings—this is the sculpture's ambition, but that doesn't happen in Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen's lifetime. When she died, the full-scale realization of her queen is cut off. The clay dries and cracks as the artist is no longer alive to wet it.

This only makes this draft an even greater treasure. A precious study of far-sighted unbendingness and original skill. The traditional symmetry of equestrian statues is dismissed in favor of sidesaddle—the traditional two legs spread over a horseback must yield to a small majesty lounging towards the left, beneath her heavy bronze skirts. The rider's position is both a statement and reality—always a blessing for artworks critiquing the system to possess those two qualities. And formally, it makes the sculpture distinctive. Muscular, trained horse legs are halfway covered in delicately modelled textiles. They hang down along the animal's sides like pure, black sheets, making the whole situation less militant than all the rearing kings. But the calm is not passive—woman and horse alike seem captured by majestic dignity rather than temperament. When a sculpture is so shrunken in its royal greatness, it is obviously an exquisite thing.

Radicality is evident in scale as well as motif, and its consequence is plain: the disheartening fact that Anne Marie Carl-Nielsen never got to cast her large queen. She presented a selection of sketches and preparatory studies at Den Frie Udstillingsbygning at the threshold of the 20th century—and it is almost miraculous that this rare, finished edition eventually found a well-deserved pedestal in an important corner of the artist's own city, though such recognition would have been unimaginable in her time. If one stands in front of the rare horsewoman, encircling her in all of one's gaze, it is possible to sense the strength of determination. The artist's determination to create and represent. The figure's determination to be seen even though eyes have plenty of other things to land on here. A bronze's determination to survive the generations who hated or ignored women on horseback. A sheer determination to simply be rare. Usually, rare things are those we remember.