In the nineteenth century painting and drawing were considered appropriate refinements for daughters of the upper middle class, but developing the talent into a profession was discouraged. Being independent, competitive, or self-reliant were characteristics thought better suited to men. Women who adopted these traits, and rejected flower painting in watercolor for the more masculine genres of portraiture and history painting in oil and marble, went against prevailing notions about femininity. Initially Caroline Louise Ransom may have been interested in art as an avocation, one of these “appropriate refinements.” However, when her engagement to marry was suddenly terminated, her interest in art became more than a pastime—she began to pursue art as a profession. In this paper I present a brief profile of this pioneer artist, concentrating on the years she spent working in Cleveland, from January, 1861 until 1885.

Ransom was born in Newark, Ohio on October 29, 1826. Her parents, John Ransom and Betsy F. Ormes had moved from Vermont to the western wilderness shortly after their marriage in 1820. Although the couple first settled in Newark, they soon moved north to the area now known as Kirtland, and then east to an area that became known as “Ransomville” in Harpersfield township. There on the banks of the Grand River, John operated grist and sawmills, and established a woolen factory. The businesses were at top capacity in 1843 when he employed thirty-five to forty men. Albert G. Riddle, who authored many biographical sketches of northern Ohioans in the late nineteenth century, commented that in both Kirtland and Ransomville there was much “that appealed to the imagination and poetic nature” of young Caroline. The painting Morning Glories over the Arbor is Ransom’s rendition of the dooryard of the family home.

Ransom was able to take advantage of an education in nearby Austinburg as the doors of the Grand River Institute were opened to women in 1840. She was an active orator at the academy, and she excelled in Latin and in Greek. By 1850, Ransom was listed in the school catalog as “Principal of the Female Department, and Teacher of Drawing and Painting.” Ransom had had some lessons from an itinerant painter who painted her portrait, but art instruction was difficult to obtain in the Western Reserve. With this in mind, in 1853 she wrote to Asher B. Durand, then president of the National Academy of Design, to inquire whether the academy would be “opened to ladies this winter.”

Ransom never studied at the academy, though she went on to study independently with three prominent New York artists—one of whom was Durand. Thomas Hicks and Daniel Huntington were her other mentors. Early in her career Ransom entered as many exhibitions as she could and her name appeared frequently in the award lists of the art divisions of state and local fairs. As early as 1854 she had
a landscape ready for the prestigious National Academy of Design (NAD) exhibition in New York. She called the picture *Sketch among the Apostle Islands, Lake Superior*. At the time Ransom studied with Durand, he was regarded America’s foremost landscape artist, and it is likely that she executed the work under his tutelage. Although Durand assured the young artist of her talent, he thought portraiture might suit her better. He first recommended that Ransom study with Henry Peters Gray, but when he turned out to be too busy, Durand then suggested "the Brusque and Conceived" Hicks. Hicks really had no intention of allowing women into his studio as students, but after some coercing from mutual acquaintances, Horace Greeley and Charles Dana, Ransom was granted admission. She was put through the normal paces drawing from plaster casts and copying prints of the Old Masters. After six months of study with Hicks, Ransom was allowed to try painting from life. Her first attempt resulted in a portrait of Mrs. Goss of New York. Also known as *Woman in Fur*, it is now among the collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art. By the late 1850's Ransom was studying with Huntington who guided her in painting the portrait of Representative Joshua Giddings of Jefferson, Ohio.

Although Ransom lived in the home of Greeley’s sister, Mrs. John Cleveland, while she studied in New York, she listed her address as Sandusky, Ohio. In January of 1861, however, she moved to Cleveland, into the studio of Allen Smith, Jr., at 236 Superior Avenue. By January 24th she had readied the studio for a public reception where her portraits of Giddings and another Jeffersonian, Benjamin Wade, were the objects of praise in *The Cleveland Leader*. Later that spring, *The Leader* reporter also mentioned that several of Ransom’s portraits were being exhibited in the windows of Sargents, an artists’ supply store, at 211 Superior. The early sixties may have been an opportune time for the young artist to take up residency in Cleveland as only two artists were listed in the city directory. The outbreak of war in April also provided Ransom with a new group of clients since families of young men joining the ranks were anxious to have pictures of their sons, husbands, brothers, and fathers while the soldiers were away.

One of the soldiers who became a general, and later Commander-in-Chief, was James A. Garfield. Both James and his wife, Lucretia, wound up playing a major role in Ransom’s life. The first evidence of her acquaintance with the general is from a letter in early November, 1863 in which she was urging the young general to “sit to” her so that she could enter the portrait in the spring exhibition of the National Academy of Design. Eventually he did sit for her, and one of the paintings that resulted is the artist’s full-length military portrait that can be seen at Lawnfield, Garfield’s home, in Mentor. Other Garfield family members whose portraits Ransom painted include those of James’s mother, Eliza Ballou Garfield, Lucretia, and two of their children, Eliza Arabella (“Little Trot”), and Edward (“Ned”).

Because of the scarcity of art centers in the young republic, it was especially important for artists to visit the art capitals of Europe to see the work of the Old Masters, and obtain instruction from contemporary artists. When in 1867 Ransom’s portrait of Giddings sold to the federal government for the then-princely sum of one thousand dollars, she began to see the possibility of her own sojourn abroad. In mid-July *The Cleveland Leader* announced Ransom’s departure date of August first, 1867, and made a plea that
area residents purchase “her exquisite works” to help finance her proposed trip. The Paris International Exposition was the drawing card for many Americans in 1867; this included Ransom as well as her good friends, the Garfields, and other Clevelanders.

Victorian decorum prohibited a self-respecting single woman such as Ransom from traveling alone, so the artist was accompanied by a Mr. and Mrs. Stevens of Cleveland. The threesome made Paris their first European stop. Soon after, the Garfields also arrived there, and moved into the boarding-house that Ransom had recommended. In addition to the art exhibition at the International Exposition (where works by Durand and Huntington were being shown), Ransom and other artists and tourists could feast upon Napoleon’s great collection at the Louvre. It was common practice for artists to copy the works of the Old Masters, and Ransom copied at least two paintings at the Louvre. Both of the works were by Raphael—one was his Self-portrait; the other his Adoration of the Saints. After visiting other art capitals on the continent, studying with William Kaulbach in Munich, and spending at least a six month residency in Italy, the artist was back in Cleveland by the end of 1868.

New Year’s Day receptions were a popular entertainment in the nineteenth century, especially for men. In The Secrets of the Great City (New York), Edward Martin discussed the annual tradition saying that it was not “considered respectable” for women to venture out on this particular day. It was, however, considered respectable for women to entertain, and Ransom did so on the first day of 1869. She undoubtedly was anxious to show off her European treasures, and area residents must have been anxious to see them as well. Mary Bigelow Janes Ingham was one Clevelander present to comment on the successes that Ransom’s “Grand Tour” had afforded her. The copies of the Old Masters were singled out for accolades both by Ingham and The Leader reporter. Her copies of Murillo’s Florentine Madonna and St. Roderick, and Correggio’s The Marriage of St. Catherine and his Della Notte were especially well received by visitors to her studio.

Ransom usually had one ear close to the political grapevine. Even before the New Year’s reception she had written to the then-governor, Rutherford B. Hayes, enquiring about portraits she had heard were being commissioned for the State Capitol. The state had appropriated money to have portraits of all former governors painted, and Ransom wanted a few of the commissions. In a letter to Hayes, dated December 15, 1868, she said that she “would like extremely to have the painting of Gov’s Brough, Chase and the present honorable incumbent.” Ransom had painted Brough’s portrait in 1863, but after having written to Hayes she learned that Allen Smith had copied her rendition of Brough while she was in Europe. Consequently, her opportunity for that commission was squelched. Samuel P. Chase’s portrait in Columbus was painted by William Cogswell, and Charles T. Webber got the Hayes’ commission. Undaunted, Ransom pushed forward until she secured the portraits of Jacob Dolson Cox and the posthumous portrait of Samuel Huntington, Ohio’s third governor. The letters between Ransom and Hayes are an amusing catalog of flattery fallen upon deaf ears. She continually tried to influence the governor with kind words, but he never responded to her flattery. In addition, there was a good deal of haggling with
the governor over the price of the portraits, when finally, in a moment of quiet resolve, the artist wrote, “We must work for fame sometimes.”

Ransom opened her studio on Superior regularly for “entertainments” that consisted of literary, musical, and historical offerings. The Leader reported about one such affair, saying that a Miss Gates’s singing “was repeatedly encored and, by general consent, was pronounced exquisite.” On another occasion, Ransom and her guests discussed the possibility of forming a society, but postponed their decision until Garfield returned from his trip to the Rocky Mountains. Although Ransom was delighted with the guests who had come, she looked forward to inviting Amasa Stone, T.P. Handy, Joseph Perkins, Handlebrush, Witt, Dr. Kirtland, and others to meet Garfield, and hear about his experiences in the West. These studio soirees were primarily social, but it was politically and economically prudent for a portrait painter to become acquainted with the socially elite. Of the aforementioned men, Ransom painted the portraits of Handy and Kirtland; Witt was the owner of her portrait of Governor Brough. She was an early networker before it became a popular concept.

The artist’s studio entertainments and receptions did not satisfy her longing for the stimulation she had found in Europe, and in larger cities in the states. In one of her numerous letters to her dear friend, Lucretia (Crete), she complained of feeling “stifled” in Cleveland. In addition, opportunities to see works of art were practically non-existent in the Forest City. In the same letter, Ransom complained that there was nothing for an artist “to feast upon or even enjoy” in Cleveland as “in other cities.”

She was justified in being disgusted with the scarcity of exhibitions in Cleveland. Outside of the “Art Halls” of the county and state fairs, Cleveland presented few opportunities to view art. The only early art exhibit of any consequence had been staged in 1864 as a part of the Northern Ohio Sanitary Fair. Such fairs came into their own throughout the country as a method of raising money to aid Civil War soldiers. That, according to the chairman of the “Fine Art Department” of the fair, was the “MAIN OBJECT”—the secondary reason to stage the exhibit was that “...of encouraging in our midst a taste for ART and developing the extent to which it has already been fostered by persons of taste and culture among us.” Ransom was a member of this “department” or committee, but none of her works were hung in County Court House, Room No. 3, when the exhibition opened on February 22nd, 1864. The next large scale exhibition which provided Clevelanders with a view of anything in the way of art or artifacts was not held until fourteen years later. Known as the Cleveland Loan Exhibition of 1878, it was held at the High School Building on Euclid Avenue. The exhibition, consisting of decorative arts, “home art,” and fine art, was so popular that it was necessary to reprint the original catalog. Ransom was listed under the category “resident artists” in the original catalog with portrait paintings of General J.C. Lee and Colonel Charles Whittlesey to her credit. In the revised catalog she was credited with showing these four works of art: Napoleon at Charleroi and the portraits of Salmon P. Chase, General George Thomas, and General James B. McPherson.
When Garfield followed the lead of other northern Ohio politicians who had taken charge of national politics, Ransom followed the Garfields to Washington. As early as 1864 she was in Washington working on a portrait of the then-congressman Garfield in a room provided for her at the Capitol. She maintained her studio in Cleveland until 1885, and did not actually move to the Federal City until the mid-seventies. Even then, she only spent her winters there, returning to Cleveland each spring. This was the period in which congress met only in the winter, and remaining all year would have been dull and not particularly advantageous for the artist. While she was there she was able to obtain some important portrait commissions, but after Garfield's untimely death in 1881, her work fell off considerably. In spite of this, she made Washington her permanent residence from 1885 until her death in 1910.

Ransom was Cleveland's most persistent and consistent early artist. She did more to elevate culture and the visual arts in the Western Reserve from 1860 to 1885 than did any other artist. And Cleveland did not forget the pioneer artist—the evidence is as apparent today as it was in 1948 when the Western Reserve Historical Society honored her with a retrospective exhibition. Her way was not an easy one as stringent limitations were placed on women in the nineteenth century, but despite the battle, Ransom refused to conform. Unlike many "ladies" who stuck to flower painting and portrait miniatures, Ransom's work fell into all of the major genres of artistic expression. In fact, she competed regularly in the genres thought better suited to men—those of portraiture and history painting. In an open letter to The Cleveland Leader in 1876 she wrote, "I have trod the thorny road, endured the 'agony and bloody sweat' and know what vitality, courage, and sublime faith in ones self is required for success in this profession for a woman." Because Cleveland and Clevelanders supported Ransom, she had the courage to forge ahead. Through her own words it is evident she was aware that her primary contribution would lie in making the professional woman artist's path a bit easier than hers had been. To her "Dear Lucretia" the artist wrote, "I trust the day is not far distant when the many obstacles in the way of woman's progress to the acme of highest art will be swept away."
Endnotes


3. Archival materials, Grand River Academy, Austinburg, Ohio.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


10. Ibid., January 24, 1861.

11. Ibid., May 25, 1861.


15. This is the same boarding house where Ransom and Mrs. Stevens were staying. (Mr. Stevens had gone on to Russia.) C.L.R. to J.A.G., September 13, 1867, Papers of James A. Garfield, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

16. On the reverse side of this oil on canvas, now owned by the Painesville United Methodist Church, is a tattered piece of paper that states that Ransom painted the work from Raphael's original at the Louvre. I have been unable to find a work by this title in several "complete works" of Raphael.

17. Later nineteenth century artists from Cleveland flocked to Munich as well. It may be that Ransom was the "first" to do so, but my study of the other artists is not extensive enough to know this as fact.


22. A plate on the portrait of Brough at the State Capitol, Columbus, has the following inscription: "Artist Allen Smith, Jr. After a portrait by Caroline L.O. Ransom." The painting is dated 1868.

23. C.L.R. to Rutherford B. Hayes, April 11, [1870].

25. Ibid. Those attending her September 1, 1872 soiree were: "Rev. Mr. Ecls and his brother Dan P. Ecls, Mr. W.R. Tuttle, George Ely, E.I. Baldwin, John Sargent [sic or artist]. Scofield (architect), Rev. White and Nash, and as many ladies of equal standing."


27. Ibid.

28. Exhibition Catalog, Northern Ohio Sanitary Fair, 1864.

29. In 1877 The Cleveland Academy of Fine Arts (Cleveland Art Club) held an exhibition. It is likely that this exhibition included works restricted to members of the Academy or Club. Rotraud Sackorlotzky, F.C. Gottwald and the Old Bohemians, Cleveland Artists Foundation, 49.

30. C.L.R. was either the only living child of John Ransom at this point, or the only responsible living child. At any rate, she maintained her studio in Cleveland until John's death in 1885. Ransom's mother, Betsy, predeceased her husband.

31. Open letter from C.L.R. to The Cleveland Leader, January 29, 1876.

32. C.L.R. to L.G. February 25, [?], Papers of Lucretia Garfield, Box 60, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.