

Helen Farnsworth Mears



Helen at age 20

Helen Farnsworth Mears was born in Oshkosh on December 21, 1872 to John Hall Mears and Elizabeth Farnsworth Mears. Helen and her two older sisters attended Oshkosh schools and the Oshkosh Normal School, but found the chief spur of creative skills within their home. Her mother and sister Mary both published books, and eldest sister Louise had a short career as a book illustrator. Helen showed a single-minded drive toward sculpture as her mode of expression. As a girl, she exhibited a head of Apollo at the county fair and made clay portraits of her neighbors.

At the age of twenty, her clay sketch of a woman and winged eagle, entitled "Genius of Wisconsin" was commissioned for the World's Columbia Exposition of 1893. The completed nine foot marble piece now stands in the Wisconsin State Capitol. Helen went on to study in New York with Augustus Saint-Gaudens and abroad in France and Italy. In 1899, she resumed work in New York, where she completed a number of commissions in bronze and marble.

Helen Mears died in February 1916 in New York City. Her death, untimely and without diagnosed illness, was soon translated into "death by starvation." Overwork and exhaustion may well have been contributing factors. The family's financial state might be attested by the fact that her grave in Oshkosh Riverside Cemetery remained unmarked until 1957, when a group from the Campus School provided a gravestone. In 1927, the GFWC-WI Woman's Club honored Helen Mears' memory by inaugurating the annual art competition for school children.



Helen working on the "Fountain of Life"