

REDISCOVERING AUDREY

by Justin D. White

My very first memories of Audrey Munson take me back to my childhood in the city of Oswego, along the great shores of Lake Ontario in upstate New York. I was blessed with a wonderful grandmother who had two equally wonderful sisters. It was like having a whole set of grandmothers. In my family, we affectionately called them The Three Fairies. I spent much of my youth entertained by their stories and wisdom. They all had wonderful homes with drawers full of treasures that kept me entertained for hours.

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My grandaunt Louise Doersam had a particularly enchanting collection. In her living room, she kept a collection of photographs and scrapbook pages that always captured my attention. My grandmother Veronica and I would often visit her, and occasionally I would muster the courage to ask about that particular collection of memorabilia. These were the photographs, she told me, of the girl once known as the American Venus. She said her name was Miss Audrey Munson. Immediately, from the first time I saw her picture, I was enthralled with the stories of Audrey's life that my grandaunt Louise told me. Among old newspaper clippings, fragile scrapbook pages, cherished professional photographs, and countless other places, Audrey's story was hidden.

My own personal interest in history and art developed by having such an opportunity to glimpse into a forgotten past. Although my aunt always indulged me when I asked about these pictures, she was always careful to show me only the ones that were age appropriate. I often wondered what I was missing out on, and I asked her why I could not see all of them. She kindly remarked, "Maybe someday when you are older you will." That was good enough for me, as I was still enchanted by the ones I was allowed to see. I had many questions to ask about this beautiful girl and was amazed at the tales I

was told. I learned there was a statue of Audrey on top of a skyscraper in New York City. Wow! This idea itself was so impressive and larger than life to my impressionable young mind.

For my tenth birthday, my grandaunt invited me to pick out anything I wanted from the curious cabinet she had in the pantry off her kitchen. I looked through all the items she had collected, and I found a special little souvenir glass of ruby color with a clear, cut-glass base. At the top of the ruby colored glass was etched the name “Audrey Munson, Pan-Am 1901.” “That is what I would like,” I told my grandaunt confidently. I knew it had belonged to Audrey. My grandaunt told me that the unique glass was very special to her, and although she was reluctant to part with it, she knew that even at my young age, I would treasure it and take care of it.

Over the years, I learned more about the connections my grandaunt and uncle had to Audrey. In was in June of 1948 that my grandaunt Louise Ross was married to her husband Leonard Doersam. They established their first home in an old Victorian boarding house in Oswego. It was to be a temporary residence, but ironically they would stay there for the next twenty-five years. Their landlords, Thomas and Lucy Stirrat, lived on the first floor. On the second floor of this big, old house, they shared living quarters with an elderly woman named Katherine Munson. For the next several years they would together live and share the same roof. There, Mrs. Munson was confined to her large Victorian bedroom, filled with antique furnishings and a large domed-top trunk. My grandaunt Louise soon learned the illustrious past contained in that trunk. It stored the memories of Mrs. Munson’s only child, Audrey. Mrs. Munson shared with pride the stories of her daughter’s extraordinary life and career as an artist’s model, muse and silent film star.

When Mrs. Munson died, she had no surviving family, and her possessions were scattered. This is how my grandaunt and uncle inherited some of the treasured memorabilia. As I grew older, I learned more about this mysterious woman and eventually developed more questions than answers. In 1998, in an amazing moment of serendipity, a fellow co-worker and historian Barbara Dix shared with me a letter she had received from two women who were writing a book and searching for information about a mysterious woman who worked as an artist’s model. Barbara had been unable to help and was amazed at what I would share with her. We wasted no time and contacted the authors that very day.

It was an incredible moment when I met with these two women, Anita Gottehrer and Diane Rozas, who had originally set out to write a book about civic monuments in New York City. It was then that Audrey Munson’s story would come to life. Even though my family had remembered her story, we believed that Audrey was virtually forgotten. Fate, however, was determined that the authors and I should meet in order to piece together the details of Audrey’s amazing life and bring it to public attention. After several years of finding pieces of her history scattered across America, the picture came to light. It was an amazing journey to learn about the life of Audrey Munson, and this is the story that was rediscovered.

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Audrey Marie Munson is perhaps one of the most mysterious figures of early-twentieth-century art. Her image graces hundreds of works of art of every form. She can be seen in sculpture, paintings, stained glass, coins, tapestries, photographs, and film. While millions have admired her visage and her figure, she remains virtually unrecognized. Carved in marble, cast in bronze, and captured on film, her image can be seen across America in the world’s most famous art collections from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City to the White House in Washington, DC. Her unmistakable form graces the most famous examples of architecture in the city of New York. However, it was not until this past decade that the memory of her began to resurface and her name was revealed to a new generation.

While Audrey Munson may be a name few will recognize, there was a time her image was everywhere. She was featured in newspapers, magazines, and eventually four silent films, in which she starred. Her career brought her fame and fortune, and eventually tragedy and despair. Like so many before and after, she succumbed to the effects of her celebrity. However, her life reads like no other. She was considered the world’s most perfect girl. Her voluptuous figure, classic features, big blue eyes, and long, flowing hair all combined to create the stuff that stars are made of. She could sing, she could dance, and she could strike a pose like no other. Most of all, she was an inspiration to the foremost artists of her time. She captured the attention and imagination of the most famous sculptors in America and was forever immortalized in marble and bronze. It is a story such that few could compare.

Audrey’s story begins more than a hundred years ago, when she was born on June 8, 1891, in Rochester, New York. She was the only child born to Edgar and Katherine Mahoney Munson. Her parents had married six years before her birth in the small village of Mexico in upstate New York on January 7, 1885. Edgar descended from distinguished New Englanders of Methodist faith, whose ancestry could be traced back to Seventeenth-Century America. Katherine Mahoney, or Kittie as family and friends knew her, had an entirely different background as a first-generation American, the daughter of Irish Catholic immigrants. It was an unusual union by Nineteenth Century standards.

Shortly after their marriage in 1885, Edgar and Katherine Munson moved to Rochester, where they worked for a wealthy family in a home on the city’s famous East Avenue, where the leading citizens such as George Eastman lived in stately residences. Edgar was a driver, and Katherine likely worked in her domestic chores. It was there in this busy industrial city where Audrey was born. A few years later, the couple relocated with their young daughter, Audrey, to Providence, Rhode Island. But their marriage would not last. Whatever transpired to warrant a divorce is unknown, but the differences must have been strong. A rare occurrence in the late-Nineteenth Century, divorce was believed by many to be an unacceptable recourse, especially in the conventional and morally conscious society of that time. It must have been particularly difficult for Katherine Munson, a woman of Irish Catholic heritage. The divorce was finalized in 1899, and the final judgment gave Katherine sole custody of seven-year-old Audrey. She was now a single mother in a Nineteenth Century world that held little advantage for such a role.

After the divorce, Edgar would return to upstate New York and resettle in the village of Mexico. There he met Cora Cook, a woman nearly twenty years younger than him; she was twenty-six and he was forty-five. They married and bore five children: Vivian (1906), Lawrence (1908), Gertrude (1911), Gerald (1913), and Harold (1918). Audrey would never fully develop a relationship with her father's second family, and never truly experience the typical family unit her father had created the second time around. In all likelihood, these much younger siblings took precedence in Edgar's daily life.

It was in Providence where Audrey attended a private school for girls. Here, she learned to sing, dance, and perform. She was determined at this point to become an entertainer on the stage, with dreams of someday teaching. Her father claimed years later that it was Audrey's mother, Katherine, "who filled Audrey's head with dreams of fame and fortune." He also said, "It was her mother who talked the stage into Audrey's head from the time she was a baby. I can remember taking her to the theater and she'd get so excited she couldn't sit down and so she'd stand through the whole thing." It is possible that Katherine had dreamt of such a life for her daughter, or was possibly reliving her own childhood fantasy. Whatever the reason, it is strongly apparent that she supported her daughter's wishes. While in Rhode Island, Audrey gained attention entertaining audiences as one of Jerald Hampton's five dancing dolls in a vaudeville show at the popular Rocky Point Amusement Park.

54 After receiving an education, Audrey and her mother headed to New York City in pursuit of her budding career. Still in her teens, Audrey's ambitions paid off, and she soon found work in the theater. Her discovery story is one of a chance encounter on the streets of New York with a photographer eager to meet her and have an opportunity to take her picture. The situation at first seemed an annoyance, but after agreeing to be photographed, the photographer persuaded her to allow him to show the pictures to an artist friend. The artist was the renowned sculptor, Isidor Konti. It was Konti who first wished to have Audrey pose, but explained that if she accepted his offer she would have to pose nude. Konti explained, "To us, it makes no difference if our models are clothed or draped in furs. We see only the work we are doing." While at first her mother refused permission, she eventually relented. She was possibly persuaded after understanding nudity from an artist's perspective.

Audrey was to become of the most famous artist's model of her day. She would inspire the most famous artists of the century, including Robert Ingersoll Aiken, A. Sterling Calder, Attilio Piccirilli, Adolph Weinman, and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Perhaps the most famous sculptor was Daniel Chester French, who created the magnificent monument of Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. Audrey was the centerpiece of many of his most important works.

In 1915, her popularity among America's most prolific sculptors led to Audrey's selection as the principal female model for the works to be created for the Panama Pacific International Exposition (PPIE). This was the world's fair held in San Francisco in celebration of the completion of the Panama Canal. Audrey posed for three-quarters of the work exhibited on the buildings, in gardens, terraces, fountains, tapestries, paintings,

and coins. The event was highly publicized throughout the world, and thousands came to see the magnificent wonderland that had been created. Audrey became more famous than she ever imagined. The publicity from the PPIE resulted in an offer from the American Film Company to star in a new silent film.

In her first film, appropriately entitled *Inspiration*, she was the first leading woman ever to appear nude in a major motion picture. In the year 1915 this caused quite a scandal in the movie industry. The film was somewhat biographical: the story of a young girl overcoming all odds and becoming a world-famous model. The film was highly praised by some critics, panned by others, and severely criticized by those of moral organizations and religious institutions. Ironically, in some cases those same groups demanded to see the movie first before determining whether it was appropriate for the general public. In many cases it was barred from theaters, deemed creative and beautiful, yet unsuitable for the general public due to its explicit nudity.

Audrey would continually face adversity in her career choices. Yet she would persevere through it all, standing by her right to make those choices. In this belief, Audrey was surely in the minority. She would not hesitate to speak her mind and truths. Her beliefs came at a cost, especially with her father. Edgar was a man of conventional ideals and disagreed with the life she lived. He was quoted in a rare interview with a newspaper reporter once as saying sadly, "I wouldn't think she'd want to do it. . . I don't take any interest in what she's doing now. I'd rather she wouldn't, but it is her affair and it brings her in lots of money and she spends it, too—just like water."

Audrey's transformation from working small parts in theater shows into to a famous and successful model had brought her an independence and source of wealth unusual for a woman in her line of work. It also afforded her a level of comfort and alleviated the conventional need to find a husband to take care of her. Audrey burst into the film industry quickly, whereas it often took others years to break through. Here she found a new medium for her craft and whole new popularity in the silent film industry. Soon the concept of the role of an artist's model was conveyed to a larger audience. Audrey now demonstrated the true skill and instrumental role a model plays in the creation of the human form in art.

55 She was captured in true life and her work was recorded completely in the altogether; that is without any clothing. To pose nude for an artist in privacy was one thing, but to bring it to the masses was a courageous, perhaps even bold, move on her part. Audrey's first film created a sensation in the media and she was soon playing a new role in the film *Purity*, which was equally daring. For this production Audrey traveled to Santa Barbara, California, where the movie was filmed on-site. Its title was a play on words, giving a duality of definitions when it came to the purity of an artist model in perception versus reality. In art the purest of figures is chosen for the great works, while the model herself is but all too human. This film broke new barriers in the history of film and created an artistic level not previously explored. It also hit a nerve with the censors of the film industry. Questions arose as to whether the film was truly art or whether it was pure exhibitionism on the part of Audrey and the producers. In many cases the film was barred from theaters, and the fine line of art was examined. This film would be followed

by yet another, *Girl O'Dreams*.

The year following this film release proved very trying for Audrey, as another major event hit the tabloid press and put her briefly in the middle of a media circus. In 1919, Audrey's former New York landlord Dr. Walter Wilkins became the chief suspect in the murder of his wife. Audrey was brought into the spotlight when it was learned that she had been a tenant of the couple. The press soon made claims that the New York District Attorney's office was looking for her, implying that Dr. Wilkins, who was still presumed innocent, had killed his wife in order to be with Audrey. Her name was soon cleared in any connection to the tragic event, but Audrey still believed the bad press had hurt her reputation.

Her last film, *Heedless Moths*, was released in 1921. In a bizarre twist, Audrey, who was to play herself in the movie, was replaced in her own role by another look-alike named Jane Thomas. Discrepancies as to why Audrey was replaced are varied. Perhaps it was because she was wanted only for her nude poses, which incidentally remained in the film, or because of some disagreements between her and the film's producers. Audrey also claimed that Jane Thomas was impersonating her at public appearances promoting the film. Eventually, Audrey sued the producers of this film for changes in casting and presentation, but nothing became of her efforts to protect her name.

Audrey left the film world and tried to earn work modeling as she had before but learned that the need for models had been all exhausted in the changing art climate. This was an unexpected change from a time when she had been in such demand. Gradually, everything had changed, and the artists she had worked for had either retired, passed on, or had plenty of sketches of her to work with and no longer needed her talent. By age thirty, Audrey's career as a model was virtually over. That same year, Audrey appeared again in national publications, this time in a syndicated newspaper through her serial memoir entitled *Queen of the Artists' Studios*. The series offered a unique perspective on the life of an artist model, in particular her career highlights and experiences, while also giving advice and take on beauty care. Here, too, she also expressed the intelligence and social understanding a model should possess in order to explore this line of work and demonstrated that the life of a model was not always glamorous. It again put her name temporarily into the spotlight but would not invigorate her career.

For many months, Audrey and her mother moved from place to place, traveling everywhere from Cincinnati, Ohio to Syracuse, New York. Audrey tried to find work, even as a teacher, as she had once dreamed, but could find nothing permanent. In 1922, Audrey escaped to the upstate village of Mexico, New York, where her parents had met and married thirty-seven years before.

Her father Edgar had since established himself as a real estate broker in Syracuse. He still owned numerous properties in and around the village of Mexico. Audrey and her mother Katherine lived in several of his modest houses, living a very spartan lifestyle. For the next several years, Audrey became a curiosity and the town celebrity as she made occasional appearances in the village, often to collect her mail or make trips to the local stores for necessities.

Her mother Katherine continued to earn a salary as a nurse and housekeeper for

local residents. Although Audrey continued to identify herself as an artist, she would never work as a model again. She would resurface in public awareness when it was announced, in 1922, that the world's most perfect girl sought to find the world's most perfect man to wed. The press had a field day with the story, and soon Audrey was receiving hundreds of proposals of marriage.

A man by the name of Joseph Stevenson of Ann Arbor, Michigan, was supposedly selected as the perfect mate. Whether this story was real or fictional is unknown, but Audrey never met such a person and certainly never married. Incidentally, Audrey's mother Katherine had insisted that Audrey was secretly married many years before to another man, a famous millionaire playboy name Hermann Oelrichs. Katherine personally believed this marriage took place and confirmed as much for a Munson family genealogist in 1930s correspondence.

The heir to one of the wealthiest families in America, Hermann Oelrichs was also the nephew of Mrs. William Vanderbilt, Jr. His mother owned one of the country's most famous mansions, named Rosecliff, in Newport, Rhode Island. Audrey and Hermann were the same age, lived in the same city, and most likely traveled in similar social circles. The evidence to support this claim of marriage was either erased completely by the Oelrichs family in an attempt to protect the family dynasty or the relationship never existed at all. Audrey may have had a relationship with Hermann, even a proposal, but it may have never come to marriage. The same is true of the story that Audrey sought the perfect mate. This may have been a complete publicity stunt on the part of the tabloid media, and the story was never true to begin with.

Regardless, Audrey's next appearance in the media was all too real and this time would prove more serious in nature. A failed suicide attempt in the spring of 1922 was a serious cry for help. Just prior to the attempt on her life, Audrey received a strange telegram that left her grief-stricken. Her mother discovered her shortly after, sought help, and Audrey was saved through the assistance of a local doctor. After her failed suicide attempt, she shrunk further into obscurity, with little contact with the outside world. Audrey and her mother kept mostly to themselves, trying to avoid the occasional interference of reporters knocking at their door. She had changed from a woman who was admired and named the most perfect girl only to be ridiculed and to have her image splashed across the pages of tabloid press.

Even though her mother Katherine was without the financial or physical means to care for her daughter, she continued to struggle alone for nearly a decade. Audrey remained in Mexico under her mother's care for the next nine years. Tragically, she continued to suffer until a nervous breakdown rendered even Audrey's situation unmanageable. Her eventual paranoia, confusion, increasing anxiety, and suicidal history all led to what would seem inevitable—institutionalization. At the prime of her life, Audrey was institutionalized by court order on her fortieth birthday in June of 1931. She was sent to live at the St. Lawrence State Hospital in Ogdensburg, New York. There she would spend the rest of her life.

Upon the death of her father Edgar, in 1945 at age 88, his most famous child, Audrey, was not listed in his obituary. The five children from his subsequent marriage

were all named as survivors. It seemed Audrey had been excluded again even after his death. Her mother Katherine continued to communicate regularly with Audrey, but visits grew fewer and farther, having to depend on public transportation and friends to seek rare personal visits to her daughter, 100 miles north. Yet her compassion and care for Audrey grew only stronger. She wrote to a family friend in 1934, "So glad in hearing from you for I am so lonesome for my dear Daughter. I miss her so much."

Meanwhile, Katherine remained in the rural countryside of the villages of Mexico and New Haven, New York. She continued to find work to support herself. In the late 1930s, she made a move to the city of Oswego, about 20 miles west of Mexico. There she rented modest apartments and earned money through work in a small private nursing home. Katherine developed a friendship with Thomas and Lucy Stirrat and sometime around 1949, while in her 80s, she went to live with them in their large Italianate home in a Victorian neighborhood on a street lined with Elms trees. Katherine would share the second-floor living quarters with the young newlyweds Leonard and Louise Doersam. There she lived in a large bedroom on the second floor filled with memorabilia of the past. Among her cherished possessions was an oil portrait and marble head bust of her beloved daughter Audrey.

Katherine would share with the occupants of the house glimpses of her life story and that of her illustrious only child. The Stirrats made her comfortable and provided for her. Eventually, she was housebound and lived the remainder of her life under their special care. In her final days, she was moved to a private nursing home in an old stone house opposite the historic Franklin Square Park in Oswego, where she died on July 9, 1958, at the age of 95. A quiet Catholic funeral mass occurred at St. Mary's Church, and she was buried in a single unmarked grave in St. Peter's Cemetery in Oswego.

Meanwhile, Audrey's amazing story continued. She lived for an incredible sixty-five years in Ogdensburg, where she would remain mostly silent about the illustrious life she had led. In her final days, she was reunited with two nieces who had never known of their extraordinary aunt. It was only in adulthood that they would discover her and seek her whereabouts. Surprised to find her alive and well in Ogdensburg, a relationship was formed and cherished for the brief time they had together. Her death on February 20, 1996, at the astonishing age of 104 remained mostly unacknowledged. An obituary was printed in her adopted town of Ogdensburg, but the rest of the world would not learn about the life and death of this amazing woman until later.

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Today, the memory of Audrey Munson has been revived in the minds of many. The book *American Venus: The Extraordinary Life of Audrey Munson, Model and Muse* by Anita Gottehrer and Diane Rozas was written as a tribute to her incredible career. Renewed interest was shown in the surrounding areas where she once lived. Newspapers such as *The Post-Standard* in Syracuse and *The Palladium-Times* in Oswego featured her as a cover story after the publication of *American Venus*. In March 2000, for Women's History Month, an exhibition in her honor was held at the Arsenal Gallery in Central Park in New York City. Her story also found a place in a spring 2000 edition of *Better*

Homes and Gardens and a prominent article in an edition of *Arts & Antiques* magazine.

After much interest, I developed a lecture series entitled "Rediscovering the American Venus: The Amazing Life of Audrey Munson." Even more recently, ideas of a postage stamp and a documentary film have been proposed. A walking tour of the public art she left behind in New York City has been printed. Finally, the recognition and honor her mother so longed for in her daughter in life has been rewarded to her after death.

Her story is now being told, yet Audrey remains largely silent and elusive. As questions are answered, ten more new ones arise. She left no full-fledged memoir of her life. Sadly, the "American Venus" was buried in an unmarked grave in the New Haven Cemetery in the town of the same name just outside the small village of Mexico, New York. There she lies at rest with her father, stepmother and half-sister Vivian. Strangely enough, she is featured in some of the country's most famous statuary of the Twentieth Century while there is no monument of her own to identify her final resting place. Hopefully, that too will change.

Audrey Munson was a woman who had explored uncharted territory, instilled new concepts, and provoked conventional Victorian ideals. Audrey was an inspiration to the greatest artists of her generation and endeared herself to them like no other. She stepped out of her comfort zone into a new art form known as the silver screen and for a brief moment captured the American audience with her pose and muse. Her work continues to engage art lovers, whether it is in the nostalgic gaze of Daniel Chester French's statue *Memory* or the serene and peaceful pose of Adolph Weinman's statue *Descending Night*. Audrey continues to evoke the muse in those who see the art she inspired.

A reporter named Norman Rose, who once interviewed Audrey in the prime of her career, described her in a prophetic way as "a slender, graceful girl who will live in marble and bronze and canvas, in the art centers of the world, long, long after she and everyone else of this generation shall have become dust!" While Audrey Munson's story is still full of mystery, by sifting through the relics of the past, her legacy and legend are revealed to a new age and a new audience. As she herself once wrote, she beautifully ends this story by conveying the true message behind her life and work:

An artist's model who is intelligent, as all must be if they are to inspire, learns a great deal about art and its uncertainties, its dreams and ideals, and its disappointments as she passes from one studio to another in her daily work. From the temperamental painter, who is a great man one day and a naughty child the next, to the earnest, analytical sculptor, who is a cynic about women even while he idealizes them, the model learns art from all its perspectives. And the more she learns, the more she is apt to ask herself in the privacy of her own room at night after a hard day's work: Just what is art after all?