

Audrey Munson

Audrey Munson was the model for two monuments in our neighborhood – the Strauss Park (106th and West End) memorial to the deaths of Ida and Isidore Strauss, who went down with the Titanic, and the double-ended Firemen’s Memorial, Riverside Park at 100th Street (1913) where the Fire Department assembles each October to remember fallen comrades. Both places have been on my mind as I’ve walked around the city and noticed the way a certain kind of sculpture was used for the completion of the Beaux Arts architectural ideal – Grand Central Station, for example, has lofty male and female nudes looking down from its heights. Audrey Munson was in great demand as the model for this kind of statuary because she had, in addition to her magnificent figure, a quality of nobility of bearing, a serenely arching brow and a proud carriage of her head. She also had a tireless devotion to her career as a model.

Her story is part of the changing art world before the First World War, which I’ve followed mainly through the career of my favorite painter John Singer Sargent. Munson’s story also marks some of the changes in the role of women in the beginning of the century, especially the danger of falling from nobility.

The following paragraphs are from Wikipedia: Audrey Marie Munson was born near [Syracuse, New York](#). Her parents, divorced when she was young and Audrey and her mother moved to [New York City](#). In 1906, when Audrey was fifteen years old, she was spotted in the street by photographer Ralph Draper, who in turn introduced her to his friend, sculptor Isador Konti. Konti persuaded the young woman to model for him and her career was off, along with all of her clothes. For the next decade Munson became the model of choice for a host of sculptors and painters in New York City. By 1915 she was so well established that she was chosen by [Alexander Stirling Calder](#) as the model of choice for the [Panama-Pacific International Exposition \(1915\)](#) [PPIE]. She posed for three quarters of the sculpture at that event as well as for numerous paintings and murals.

In 1916, probably as a result of her exposure in California at the PPIE, Munson moved to California and entered the movies. In all Munson starred in four silent films. The first of these, *Inspiration*, the story of a sculptor’s model, featured the first time that a woman took off all her clothes on film. Recreating scenes from classic paintings, the censors were reluctant to ban the film fearing they would also have to ban [Renaissance art](#). The films were a box office success, with audiences eager to expand their new found interest in art. The reviews, however, were very polarized. Unfortunately, only a single print of one film, *Purity* has survived. [*She also appeared in, and wrote, many illustrated magazine articles about modeling in the nude, defending its idealistic aims.*]

1919 found Munson back in NYC, living with her mother in a boarding house owned by Dr. Walter Wilkins. Wilkins fell in love with Audrey and in an attempt to make himself eligible for her, murdered his wife, Julia. Although Audrey and her mother had left NYC prior to the murder the police still wished to question them and this resulted in a

nationwide hunt for them. They finally were questioned in Toronto, Canada, where they testified that they had moved out because Mrs. Wilkins had requested it.

This satisfied the police, but the negative publicity generated by the case effectively ended Munson's career as a model and actress. By 1920 Munson, unable to find work anywhere, returned with her mother to her home town and worked for a while selling kitchen utensils door to door. Thereafter Munson began showing signs of possible mental unbalance and paranoia and in 1931 a judge ordered the 39-year-old Munson into a psychiatric facility near Syracuse for treatment . She was to remain there for the next 65 years, until her death in 1996 at the age of 104.

Her career as a model lasted nine years. She modeled for forty-three completed and installed works of art.