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## Tenacity

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## Tenacity

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TENACITY

By

ANGELA DANIELLE GOURDON STEVENSON,  
Bachelor of Fine arts, Master of Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
Stephen F. Austin State University  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements

For the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY  
December, 2019

*Tenacity*

By

Angela Danielle Gourdon Stevenson, B.F.A, M.A.

APPROVED

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## ABSTRACT

Creating my exhibition, *Tenacity*, was a labor of love that took place over the year and a half that I was a student in Stephen F. Austin State University of Texas's Graduate Program. I explored new processes in painting, including the use of transfers, and did extensive research into the lives of female historical figures. This exhibition was born of a wish to share knowledge with others as well as to remind society that anyone can elicit change.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I first began my journey as an artist, I arrived at university with my own preconceived notions about art. I had had very little schooling in art but, nevertheless, I naively held onto certain principles I believed to be true. The most important “truth” I held onto was that realism was the ultimate style of art. This idea would cause me to struggle with creating and ultimately stifled my creative process. Perfection seems great in theory but is unattainable in application. Finally, my drawing professor, Brooks Defee, pulled me aside. He had seen me struggling. I was trying to become a photorealist, but I no longer enjoyed drawing. He told me to “loosen up.” That meeting would permanently change my art.

Another vital experience to my evolution as an artist was taking a class with Clyde Downs. The first day of class, he took my traditional drawing utensils away and gave me a strip of matte board and a bottle of black india ink. At first, I was averse to this sudden change. I disliked the process because I could not get the fine detail I prized so much. I was not completely in control of the medium. I was losing things I valued but, in that process, I found something wonderful. I found that linework could be elegant; it could be expressive. Adding color to



expressive linework created magic. I had spent years focusing solely on the technical side of art and had actively worked to eradicate my own personal style. Ultimately, I was unable to do so and have found much more enjoyment in creating without focusing on whether or not my art is technically correct. I came to the decision that I wanted to paint what I felt instead of what I saw in the world around me. We live in reality, so why should I paint it?

The final nail in the “photorealism coffin,” was when I journeyed to Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. Having grown up poor, this was one of the first art museums I had visited. In their permanent collection, they possessed a painting by Henri Matisse. While delving into Expressionism, I discovered Matisse and the Fauves, as well as Die Brücke and Blau Reiter. Their innovative use of color and expression drew me to their work. I also studied Van Gogh’s letters to gain insight into his highly emotional pieces. Being able to travel to Kimball Art Museum, and seeing the art I had been studying in books and online was a life changing event for me. Books, photographs, and online images all allow for a much larger audience partake in artwork. Unfortunately, replicated images cannot compare to seeing a piece in person. Photographs cannot capture the size and scope of a work of art. Nor can they capture the presence of an artwork. Art commands attention, it draws the viewer into the inner world of the artist. It inspires thought and emotion, it evokes a response. A photograph of a piece will not have the same effect. It is easier to overlook a picture in a book. The true power of art is in effect when being viewed in person. I was only

able to learn this after I visited an art museum. I was able to witness and experience the effect art can have.

One painting at Kimball Art Museum stood out in particular. It was *L'Asie* by Henri Matisse. The piece was 3'10" x 2'8" and dominated the wall it was mounted on. The colors and elegant linework, as well as the positioning of the figure, immediately captured my attention. It was simple, yet vibrant. Matisse was able to imply that the woman is lying on a lounge or couch of some sort by using fields of red and swirls of black. It was as if he was able to say so much more by simplifying the image down to its essence. I stood in front of *L'Asie* for twenty minutes. It may sound strange, but it was almost a spiritual experience. I was captivated. It was like I had an epiphany. From that point on, my paintings changed drastically.

The first series I created utilizing expressive linework and color was very selfish. I had become enamored by the idea that color could represent emotion. There is a phrase from a visiting artist that stuck with me. He said, "Art is an exorcism of the soul." With my newfound love of Expressionism, I set out to create emotional pieces inspired by my memories and experiences as a child. This was a labor of love that was sometimes very difficult. I wanted others to feel how I felt, to experience a glimpse of my past. When I completed the series, I found myself at peace. There was a moment when everything came together, and I finally felt finished.

After completing my series focused on introspection, I had to decide on a direction to take my art. It was imperative that I continue to move forward and progress. It was then that I began to explore new avenues of thought. I had come to realize that all artists have a message. Even I, who had not taken the time to ponder what my art's message was, was saying something to my audience. Of course, the message my viewers' saw in my paintings differed from person to person but there was a dialogue taking place. Just as painting is a dialogue between the canvas and the creator, the finished work is a conduit for the exchange of thought and emotion between the artist and viewer. I had come to a point that I needed to decide what I wanted to put out into the world. As creators, we are all shouting our messages out into society. I decided that if I were to be a part of the shouting mass, I would want to put something out there that would help others. We live in an age of media and symbols. Just as creators scream their messages and meanings, so too do advertising companies and corporations. How many of those messages are beneficial? How many of those messages ask something of the average person? In a society that has become increasingly about taking, I wanted to give. Perhaps no one would hear what I was putting out into the world, but it would not harm anyone. It would not demand anything. It would only give.

The thought of starting a new series of work was daunting at first, but I realized that I need not derail my train of thought completely. I have always viewed art as an evolution of self; why should this be any different? I

predominately painted female figures, especially strong women. I also had a passion for feminism and female historical figures. When I read their stories, I felt empowered and proud. I grew up in an environment of alcoholism and drug abuse and would often imagine myself as the female lead in the current book I was reading. I imagined myself as someone strong and independent; someone able to change their situation. I feel that transitioning to painting female historical figures is perhaps just an extension of that childhood escape. The women I paint had a strong enough will to change their own situations and were the catalyst for change in the world around them. My childhood situation has passed, and I am an independent adult now, no longer chained down by my past. Still, I hoped to gain strength from painting these tenacious women from history. They were able to push against society to do what they felt called to do. I wanted the strength to push my body and mind to be able to accomplish what I felt needed to be done.

I have multiple mental illnesses that have plagued me for my entire life, as well as a bevy of physical ailments. Perhaps, the most pressing issue is that I am slowly losing mobility. Within six years I went from being able to ride a bicycle to having to use a wheelchair off and on. It was terrifying and my family and I could only think that I was supposed to have more time. Unfortunately, life does not necessarily tell you its plans and one has to make do with what they're given. At least, that is what we are told. We must "make do" with what we have. The women I paint did not "make do," they saw what they wanted and pushed past what they were given to squeeze more out of life. They were normal,

average women for their time, but they demanded more and were able to accomplish it. I wanted to paint them and draw their strength into myself. I wanted others to see them and hear their stories and feel a fire light within their souls. I want my viewers to see endless possibility ahead and not be afraid of the struggle it takes to accomplish one's goals. As I painted, I did grow more confident. I became aware of my limits and decided not to be defined by them. Most likely, I will never change the world, but I would consider myself successful if I can change just one person's perception about their challenges.

## MATERIALS AND PROCESS

Along with a change of subject, came a change of process. Naturally a creator's process changes as they continue to create artifacts. This change was definitely a learning experience. For the first time, I had to plan out the pieces I intended to create. My first series was almost completely intuitive but *Tenacity*, my newest body of work, required more planning. As a lover of history, I began my process with quite a bit of research. I wanted to delve into the figures' lives before I attempted to paint them. I became passionate about their stories and then strove to encapsulate that passion in line and color on canvas. Balancing their powerful stories with equally powerful art was of the utmost importance. I did not want to create artwork that could not stand on its own, or that would be overshadowed by the descriptions I would include with the paintings.

Originally, I painted illustrations of the women. I also worked on a larger scale; my first paintings in the series were 40x50 inches. The series was taking shape, but it became apparent that I was not fully capturing the story of these monumental figures. The paintings were bold and captured their spirit but left the viewer with no mystery, no reason to delve deeper into the subject. The images I was creating had a wealth of history behind them but did not lure the viewer to partake in its bounty. They were too straight forward. This was a difficult problem to conquer. I am and have always been an incredibly straight forward

person. There is no allure to me nor is there any mystery. I was raised to always say what I mean and mean what I say. I began to consider my conundrum in earnest. I was constantly researching and saving articles, yet nothing alluded to that part of my process. Then I considered layering their stories into the painting. How would one accomplish that? At first, I tried collage. To call what I was doing collage is to be very gracious. I was adhering the articles to the canvas using Mod Podge and aligning them in a grid like pattern. There really was no collage like element to what I was doing. The paper did not want to adhere to the sizing in the canvas and the grid effect was distracting. The text itself was distracting from the imagery I was creating. Next, I tried transfers.

The idea of using transfers had been mentioned to me some time before I actually attempted the process. I am a stubborn person and very hesitant to make change, so I resisted the idea for some time. When I finally gave transfers a chance, I felt incredibly uneasy. Even though I had given up some control when I journeyed into Expressionism, I was still determined to hold on to what control I had left. My first attempt at transfers resulted in quite a bit of the articles deteriorating. I did not know what to make of it, but I decided to give the process a chance. Despite the fact that the articles did not transfer perfectly, I continued with my painting and was quite satisfied with the result. I continued to apply the transfers in a grid formation for some time before taking the plunge and truly applying them in a collage-like manner. Utilizing the transfer process has always been a bit anxiety inducing; one does not know how the final project will look

while applying the paper to the canvas. It always seems to look horrid before the process is done. Thankfully, it works out in the end. My canvases have a beautiful texture and absorb the paint in interesting ways. My figures seem to come forward from the deteriorating text as if it were an analogy of them rising from obscurity to take their place in history. It was an unintended effect, but it fit my work beautifully.

As my process changed, so too did my color palette. I still painted utilizing an Expressionist color palette and vibrant hues but the tones I chose were different from what I used in my previous series, *Expressions*. The series about my past made use of more subdued or “muddy” tones that were art historically indicative of drug use and illness. The tone of *Tenacity* is much different than my previous work, thus my color palette has evolved. Explaining how I use color is a bit difficult. I experience color in vibrations; this sensation is felt internally. Each hue has a different vibration frequency than the rest, for example: yellow has a faster or higher vibration frequency than blue and complimentary colors often have the same vibration frequency. Utilizing the way I experience color, I am able to color match precisely by visually assessing the color and then making note of its frequency.

I choose colors whose vibrations will create harmony. The strong linework I utilize creates “pauses”; painting is like creating a melody. The melodies I create with color and line are not heard but are physically felt. Recently, it has come to my attention that it is possible that others do not necessarily experience



color the same way I do. Perhaps there is a better way to explain my use of color, but I am at a loss as to what that would be. Despite this, I shall endeavor to provide clarity in respect to my artistic process.

Before touching a sketchbook or canvas, I begin my work by doing an extensive amount of research on the figure I plan to paint. I try to choose women whose situations remind me of aspects of my life. I believe the ability to relate to the work and to the women, helps create a strong impact. If I can relate to these historical figures, it is not a stretch to believe that others will be able to as well.

Once I have my articles saved, I begin to sketch the figure. I always create a realistic portrait of the woman first. I believe that a person's face can give you insight into who they truly are. The look in the eyes, the demeanor, smile lines, and small quirks in their appearance can reveal inner qualities they possess. There is a saying, "The eyes are the window to the soul," I believe that to be completely true. Once I have the portrait done, I begin exploring symbols that I may associate with the woman's story. I do many thumbnails of the painting, exploring different layouts and compositions. I begin to prep the canvas after I have chosen my composition.

Prepping the canvas consists of several steps. First, I must print the articles that I have saved. I then rip them into pieces so that I may collage them to the canvas. In order for the paper to adhere to the canvas, I use clear acrylic medium and apply it liberally. The pieces of paper are then laid out with the text

facing the surface of the canvas and pressed into the clear acrylic medium. After the entire surface is covered, the piece must dry and cure for twenty-four hours. The next step is perhaps the messiest. After the articles have cured, I take the canvas into the bathtub and begin to slowly rub the paper away using warm water and my hands. I have tried to utilize other tools to make the process easier, but one must be gentle when removing the transfers. Eventually all but the first layer of the paper is disposed of, leaving the text on the canvas. The amount of surface area I cover with the articles depends on the painting's composition. Once the transfers have dried, I sand them to remove any papers that may not have adhered to the canvas. Finally, I can apply a base coat of oil paint. Generally, I choose the base color by focusing on the emotional tone I feel the painting should have. I want to do justice to the way I feel when reading the stories of these amazing women. I try to pick a hue that best represents the emotions I felt while reading about their challenges and endeavors.

Once the base color of the painting has dried, I then sketch the imagery I wish to depict. Depending on the color of the canvas, I may do this with chalk or pencil. I then mix odorless mineral spirits and linseed oil with Prussian blue to create an ink like consistency. Using a round brush, I draw the contours of the painting. I prefer using a watery consistency of paint and a round brush for this step to achieve a calligraphic line. I endeavor to achieve an elegance and energy via linework.

Finally, I begin to add the rest of the colors to the painting. As I stated before, I choose colors according to their vibrations and the overall feeling they give me. As I work on the rest of the painting, I make it a point not to obscure the calligraphic linework I created in the previous step. I was once told that painting is not my strong suit. This may be true, but I consider my paintings as an extension of drawing. Mark making is an important part of my painting process.

## BACKGROUND

Many of my stylistic choices and techniques are founded in prior art historic movements. Perhaps the movement that influenced me the most was that of the Fauves. As I have stated, earlier in the Introduction, I was immediately drawn to their use of color and linework. The Fauves were a group of early twentieth century modern artists who were studying under Gustave Moreau at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in France during the early 1900s. Their works emphasized painterly qualities and strong color over the representational or realistic values retained by Impressionism. This style of painting was short lived but had an influence on subsequent artists. The painter, Henri Matisse, was regarded as the movement's leader.

Despite gaining inspiration from prior art movements, my work has grown and evolved on its own as well. My art, like Fauvism, emphasizes color and mark making but my subject matter is vastly different. Although I prize vibrant color, I follow Kandinsky's school of thought regarding colors possessing the ability to bring forth emotion. My artwork is not so much an expression of color but of passionate feelings. It could be said that the Fauves utilized vibrant color purely for the sake of using color, whereas Wassily Kandinsky ascribed particular emotional or "spiritual" qualities to each hue. Vincent Van Gogh also believed certain color palettes represented emotions and utilized brushwork to create

movement and visual interest in his paintings. I paint very quickly and with intensity, resulting in spontaneous brushwork. The contrast between my use of brushwork while utilizing color and the calligraphic linework I draw my subjects with create an interesting juxtaposition within my pieces. It is important to grow from the artists who came before you, but it is also important to be aware of contemporary artists.

The first contemporary artist I became aware of was Leonid Afremov. Many of his works are readily available to the public; he has quite the commercial presence. This is perhaps how I first came to discover him. Afremov was a Russian–Israeli modern impressionistic artist. He created beautiful scenes utilizing an Expressionistic palette and impressionistic brushwork. I became enamored with his use of color. Each painting has an overall tone and his color choices harmonize and deepen the emotional aspects of the piece. When I view his paintings, the colors vibrate in concert. The use of small patches of color creates a “shimmering” effect. His artwork is truly like music.

Many other contemporary artists have helped shape my journey and inspired me along the way. One such artist is Nandipha Mntambo. Mntambo is an African born artist who creates captivating photographs and sculptures that are highly influenced by her heritage and traditions. Her sculpture work is innovative while also paying homage to her roots. I feel that my series, *Tenacity*, is similar in that I am paying my respects to the historical women who came before me. They paved the way for many of the rights modern day women have

and I am working to raise awareness about them and their deeds. I want to remind people that our ancestors were able to elicit great change in society and we can do so as well.

Graphic Designer and Street Artist Shepard Fairey's *Portrait of Barack Obama* was also highly influential. It helped demonstrate that contemporary artwork can serve as a catalyst for society. The large scale mixed-media stencil became the iconic campaign image for the historic campaign of President-elect Barack Obama. It spread a message of hope and progress as our nation crossed a historic milestone. Personally, it opened the avenue for me to pursue art that could spread an important social message. Originally, I had thought that the time of art being able to elicit social changes had passed. Art no longer serves as large of a role as a social activity as it once did before the invention of modern-day technology. More of the public was aware of artistic movements and their messages because art played a larger role in the entertainment of the masses before the advent of radio and television. *Portrait of Barack Obama* proved that art still has the power to create social commentary. It serves as a continual inspiration to continue working in my current series. My work may not garner the attention his has, but it does have the power to remind others that society can be changed.

## TENACITY



*The Pen is Mightier*, 24in x 36in, 2019

Ida B. Wells was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She lived a life that was centered on combating prejudice and violence, who fought for equality for African Americans, especially women. Her investigative journalism helped raise awareness of the use of lynching as a tool to oppress African Americans across the South. She refused to stop spreading the truth, even after she was forced to leave the South.



*Sissieretta Jones*, oil on canvas, 40in x 50in, 2018

Sissieretta Jones, (January 5, 1868 or 1869– June 24, 1933) was an American soprano. She sang grand opera, light opera, and popular music. Jones made her New York debut in 1888 and four years later she performed at the White House for President Benjamin Harrison and met with international success. Besides the United States and the West Indies, Jones toured in South America, Australia, India, southern Africa, and Europe. For every performance, she wore medals pinned to the front of her dress. Each medal was sent to her from an admirer. She was once told she could become more popular by pretending to be white, but she refused.





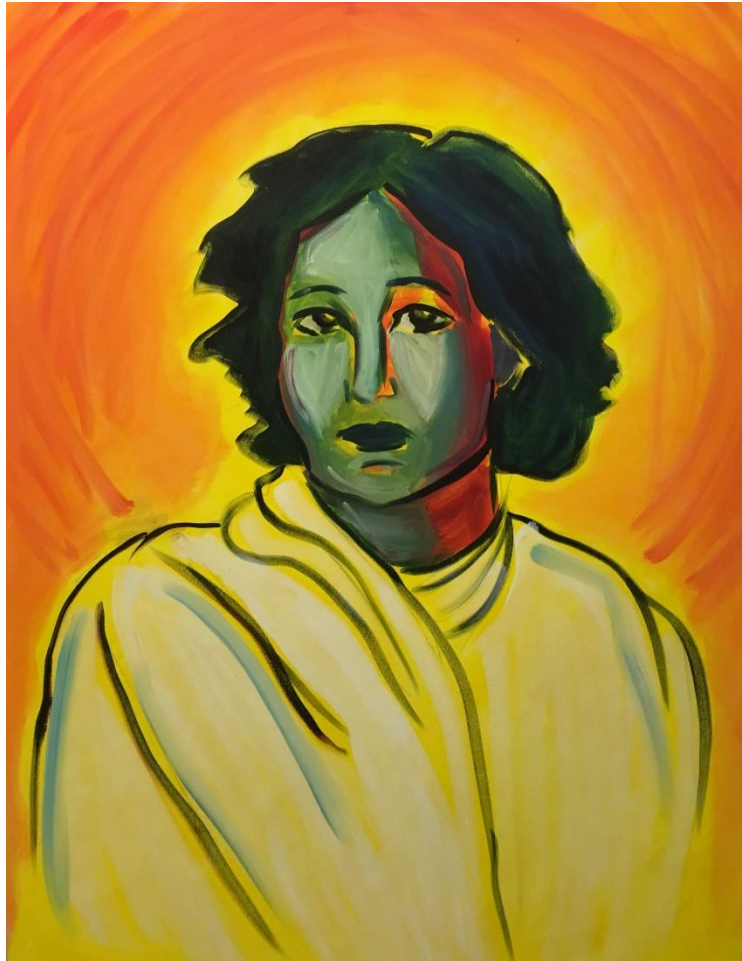
*Katherine Switzer*, oil on canvas, 40in x 50 in, 2018

In 1967, Katherine Switzer became the first woman to run the Boston Marathon as a numbered entrant. During her run a race official attempted to attack Switzer and seize her official bib. He was shoved to the ground by Switzer's boyfriend, who was running with her. She went on to continue the race. Five years later, women were officially allowed to run the Boston Marathon.



*Ida*, oil on canvas, 40in x 50in, 2018

Ida Bell Wells-Barnette, also known as Ida B. Wells, was an investigative journalist during the 1890s. Wells documented lynching in the United States through her indictment called “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases,” investigating frequent claims of whites that lynchings were reserved for black criminals only. A white mob destroyed her newspaper office and presses but she continued her investigative journalism.



*Ramabai*, oil on canvas, 40in x 50in, 2018

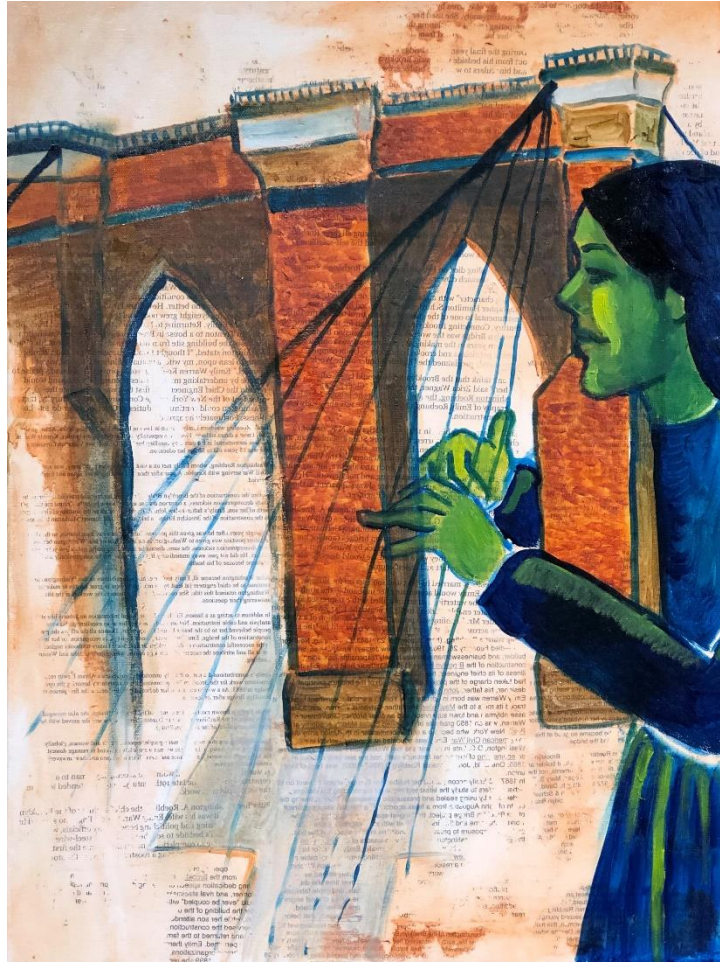
Pundita Ramabai was an Indian social reformer and a pioneer in the education and emancipation of women in India. She was the first woman to be accorded the titles of Pandita as a Sanskrit scholar and Sarasvati after being examined by the faculty of the University of Calcutta. In the Congress session of 1889, she was one of the 10 women delegates.



*Emma's Angel*, oil and mixed media, 18in x 24in, 2019

Emma Stebbins (1 September 1815 - 25 October 1882) was an American sculptor and the first woman to receive a public art commission from New York City. She was best known for her work *The Angel of the Waters* (1873), also known as Bethesda Fountain, located in Central Park. She studied sculpture in Rome. Where she met Charlotte Cushman, an American actress. The pair quickly became a couple and within a year of meeting, the women exchanged unofficial vows and considered themselves married. After Cushman's death, Stebbins ceased to create art and dedicated her time to write her partner's biography.





*Instrumental*, oil and mixed media, 18in x 24in, 2019

Emily Roebing was married to Washington Roebling, a civil engineer and the chief engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge. After her husband developed decompression disease, she served as the intermediary between her husband, the workers, and public officials. She and her husband jointly planned the continued construction of the bridge and she saw to the day to day supervision and project management. The bridge was finished in 1893.



*The Gift*, oil and mixed media, 18in x 24in, 2019

Pundita Ramabai went against Indian customs during the 1800s and opened centers of learning for widows. During her lifetime, widows in India were expected to leave meager lives of poverty away from the eyes of the public. After losing her husband, Ramabai refused to accept this. She used her education to open centers for widows to learn life skills and discover new ways of life. She traveled to Europe and converted to Christianity. After her conversion, she opened missions in India to help widows and orphans.

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