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Frederic Auguste Bartholdi and the Statue of Liberty

By *Daniel J. Carden*

With many modern art pieces, it is practically impossible to separate the artist from the art. Because most works of modern art tackle a subject that is uniquely personal to the artist who created the piece, the viewer must have a complete knowledge of where the piece fits into the history of art and where it fits into the artist's own biography to truly understand the meaning of the piece in the context it was created. This is not to say, however, that the art form is always inescapably tied to the artists. Going back a century, it becomes possible to consider separately the artist and his art. In any creative endeavor, some aspects of the creator will come though in his creation, but generally, an artist who presents big ideas in his work goes beyond attaching just a personal meaning to his art and manages to create something that has a collective meaning for all men. In this case, I am specifically referring to Frederic Auguste Bartholdi and his masterpiece, *Liberty Enlightening the World*, henceforth referred to as the Statue of Liberty. The idea of "liberty" is one that has challenged men for generations; Bartholdi's nineteenth-century personification of that seemingly ungraspable idea therefore demands the art form to be placed in its appropriate context. To that end, this paper will first examine the career and work of Bartholdi: his style, subject matter, and critical assessment; and second, use the Statue of Liberty as an example of Bartholdi's artistic direction and concerns, in order to more fully understand and place the man and the piece in their proper context.

Bartholdi's mature artistic style can be summed up in one word: big. He was no Medardo Rosso shaping minute sculptures out of wax, Bartholdi's colossal pieces tower over everything and everyone who see them. Inspired by the pyramids and the Sphinx on a trip to Egypt in 1855, Bartholdi told his companions that he would build a new statue for Egypt—twice the size

of the Sphinx. Bartholdi called the Egyptian figures “granite beings of imperturbable majesty, whose benevolent and impassive gaze seems to despise the present and to be fixed on the limitless future” (Blanchet 23). Returning to Paris, Bartholdi said, “When I discover a subject grand enough, I will honor that subject by building the tallest statue in the world” (Price 29). Thus, Bartholdi quenches the desire to tackle big subjects by creating big pieces. Interestingly, Bartholdi did not start his artistic career sculpting massive statues, but worked instead with small clay pieces, shaping three-dimensional representations of characters created by artist and illustrator Theophile Schuler in his native town of Colmar in the Alsace region of France. Bartholdi’s first attempt at a life-size sculpture, of the founder of the convent at Colmar, caught the attention of sculptor Antoine Etex, whose figures were placed on the Arch of Triumph in Paris. But most influential on Bartholdi’s style was the time he spent in the workshops of Ary Scheffer. As a young man, Scheffer had lived in the United States with Marquis de Lafayette, the Frenchman who did nearly as much as George Washington to help America break their colonial ties to Great Britain; later, Scheffer painted a portrait of Lafayette that now hangs in the U.S. House of Representatives. As a place to experiment with paint and canvas and clay, in Scheffer’s studio, Bartholdi completely ignored his school work and molded a future for himself in art.

Bartholdi’s range of artistic influences include illustrators, sculptors, painters and later, Eugene Viollet-le-duc, the architect who restored Notre Dame Cathedral. What is significant about Bartholdi’s influences are the names that are not mentioned. Degas, Rodin, and Manet were all contemporaries of Bartholdi. While they were breaking new ground in subject matter, color, form, and the use of light, Bartholdi stuck to traditional notions of artistic beauty. While the early modernists struggled for acceptance, Bartholdi was getting commissions. With his first commission coming at age 19, Bartholdi quickly developed a reputation as an excellent creator of public monuments. His mature style developed from these experiences. He told the *New York World* in 1878: “I have a horror of all frippery in detail in sculpture. The forms and effects of that art should be broad, massive and simple” (Blanchet 22). Inspired by colossal Egyptian sculpture to create pieces for large-scale public spaces, Bartholdi avoided the preoccupation with nuances of style and detail that obsessed his contemporaries and created the quintessential public monument: simple, lacking excessive ornamentation, with an easy to understand, yet deeply significant meaning.

Certainly Bartholdi’s best known piece, the Statue of Liberty, meets all of

these criteria, yet that spirit is reflected in his lesser known but no less significant works. At 19, Bartholdi was commissioned by his hometown of Colmar to sculpt a 12-foot-high statue of General Jean Rapp, a Colmar native who had been an aide-de-camp to Napoleon. Working day and night at his own studio in Paris, Bartholdi's *General Rapp* was accepted into the Salon of 1855, yet was too tall to fit into the exhibition hall. The jury solved this problem by displaying *General Rapp* outside the building on the Champs Elysees, a move that undoubtedly both made Bartholdi the envy, and raised the ire, of every exhibitor in the hall. But for Bartholdi, who took his fateful trip to Egypt while *General Rapp* was on display, the success of this first monument set him on a road that led to dozens of other public statues, busts, sculptures on building facades and funerary monuments.

Bartholdi found the fame and fortune that he wanted, but his opportunities to make Egyptian-like colossal sculptures were decidedly limited, though this was certainly not for a lack of ideas. Moved by the excavation of the Suez Canal in Egypt and supervised by Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps in the late 1860s, Bartholdi drew up sketches for an immense lighthouse to be located at the entrance of the canal. Bartholdi considered the project to be of equal weight to the creation of the pyramids. Designed to be a robed woman holding a torch aloft, Bartholdi thought that one of his works would finally stand among the other massive Egyptian sculptures. Broke and unable to afford this new wonder of the world, Egyptian ruler Ismail Pasha let Bartholdi know that the lighthouse was not to be. As Blanchet writes, the aborted Egyptian statues were not a blow to Bartholdi's career because "[h]e was living in an era when governments began to crave grand memorials to their growing industrial power. The times were right for Bartholdi's old-fashioned ideas" (Blanchet 24). His memorial marking the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, in which Bartholdi's native Colmar and Alsace were gobbled up by Germany, *The Lion of Belfort* (1880) showed that even though France had lost the war, they still had their courage. This massive 24-meter-long and 16-meter-wide sculpture, which also functioned as a tool of public propaganda, would be an important factor and influence in the design of Bartholdi's last major work, the Statue of Liberty.

Bartholdi never intended the Statue of Liberty to be his last significant piece. Showered with praise from art critics from the age of 19 when his *General Rapp* was selected to be in the Salon of 1855, and most certainly from the Colmar townspeople long before that, Bartholdi was a popular Parisian sculptor and in high demand for those who could afford him.

Using classical traditions, Bartholdi, as an official sculptor, recreated the best of Greece and Rome in Paris and throughout France. While works by other sculptors, Rodin's *The Age of Bronze* (1877) for example, were not as well received as Bartholdi's *Lion of Belfort* (1880), it is Rodin we remember today, not Bartholdi. Perhaps because Bartholdi found so much success and critical acclaim while still very young, he did not feel the need to innovate. While Rodin tried to represent the internal structure of a figure captured in a single instant, without much critical success, Bartholdi created the classical public monuments that the people wanted. At the same time, monuments and public statues, such as those created by Bartholdi, take on a significance apart from their creator. The statue itself is remembered, not necessarily the person who created it.¹

The Statue of Liberty

Standing tall in New York Harbor, as she did for the millions of immigrants who entered the United States of America at nearby Ellis Island, Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty is a symbol of freedom and the opportunity that exists in America to start life over. In the beginning, though, she was a symbol of friendship between two nations. For purely selfish reasons, France had aided the United States in their revolution to break free from colonial ties to Great Britain. France was also one of the first allies of the new United States of America when that nation was formed in 1776. During the French Revolution, American patriots such as Thomas Paine aided the French forces fighting for liberty, freedom, and democracy, and America as a whole supported the First Republic of France. Two republics later, following the unexpected loss of the Alsace and Lorraine regions to Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, France turned to the United States, which had just come out of a terrible war of its own, for guidance in re-establishing a democratic government. With the Third Republic firmly established by 1875, France decided to present a gift to the United States, not only as a symbol of the long-standing Franco-American friendship, but also as a commemoration of America's centennial in 1876. The Franco-American Union saw to it that Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty proposal would be that gift.

After Germany invaded his native Colmar, Bartholdi, like millions of refugees escaping war in Europe before him, left France, taking an extended trip to the United States. Sailing into New York Harbor on June 21, 1871, Bartholdi wrote, "The image presented to the sight of a passenger arriving in New York is splendid, when, after some days of voyaging, the

pearly dawn reveals the magnificent scene of these great cities” (Blanchet 36). Several sources indicate that as Bartholdi sailed into New York, he spotted Bedloe’s Island in the middle of the bay and immediately modified his original idea for a lighthouse on the Suez into the Statue of Liberty. Bartholdi decided to create not just a monument to Franco-American friendship like his later statue Washington and Lafayette (1892) but also “a work of profound moral worth” (Blanchet 36). On a tour of America that summer, Bartholdi presented his idea for the Statue of Liberty to a wide variety of people, including President Ulysses S. Grant. Finding an America that was receptive to his idea for the statue, Bartholdi returned to France, where an uncertain political situation forced Bartholdi to spend nearly three years working out his idea in models before the statue proposal could be made public.

The idea of using “liberty” for this spectacular monument fit perfectly within Bartholdi’s artistic concerns, for it combined something personal, the occupation of Colmar by Germany,² with a universal theme, which could all be embodied in one colossal statue. For the statue to achieve the meaning Bartholdi sought to convey, however, it had “to appear as impersonal in origin, as natural in theme, and as universal in appeal as possible” (Trachtenberg 32). No other theme could be more natural to mark a friendship between France, whose “Liberte, Egalite, and Fraternite” mimics the inalienable American right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” To personify the concept of liberty, however, was somewhat more difficult. When President Lincoln prohibited slavery in the United States in 1863, and the Thirteenth Amendment later added the force of law to Lincoln’s proclamation, no longer could the idea of liberty simply be freedom from actual bondage. Instead, liberty became “a much broader, more diffuse concept, involving liberties of many kinds, centering on the freedom of citizens from undue constraints on their life by legitimate rulers” (Trachtenberg 64). Liberty could no longer be represented as the Romans had on a temple in the third century B.C. as hope for those in bondage; rather she was now represented in pieces like Delacroix’s revolutionary painting *Liberty Guiding the People* (1830), leading the oppressed against the aristocracy. Bartholdi’s statue would blend these two images and forever stamp his concept of liberty on the minds of all men.

With the theme in place, Bartholdi began to work on the actual construction of the statue. Unlike the smaller sculptures or numerous busts he had created, or even some of his larger pieces, Bartholdi could not work on the Statue of Liberty by himself. Instead, he had a workshop, with up to

50 craftsman employed at the same time. While Bartholdi was not salaried as creator of the statue, the workmen had to be paid; like any major project, funding was always a problem. Fortunately, the Franco-American Commission came through for Bartholdi, first by collecting subscriptions, and later with a lottery that raised money to pay the workmen and purchase the 100 tons of copper and 125 tons of steel that would go into the statue before it was completed. Because political favor was not on his side until 1875, Bartholdi could only exhibit Liberty's arm and torch at the 1876 Philadelphia Exposition in honor of America's centennial. The uncompleted sculpture, though, would get the American people as excited about the statue as their French counterparts. Eventually, with some coaxing from Joseph Pulitzer's New York *World*, Americans would raise enough funds for the statue's pedestal.

A stone or clay version of the Statue of Liberty, the material from which Bartholdi's created his earlier works, would have been impossible to create because of the tremendous weight. Bartholdi "thought well beyond the image of what would be the world's tallest monument," and enlisted a Parisian with a penchant for steel, Gustave Eiffel, to create an internal skeleton of steel for the statue, so that his sculpture could withstand the winds of New York Harbor (ENR 46). While Eiffel would go on to create a tower of his own three years after the Statue of Liberty left for America, "Eiffel anticipated skyscraper construction when he designed the Statue of Liberty's supporting frame" (ENR 46). Eiffel's steel skeleton, which Bartholdi covered with 350 thin plates of copper, was a true innovation in sculpting. A new vision of Liberty demanded a new approach to her creation.

Conversely, the reason the Statue of Liberty is the characteristic example of Bartholdi's artistic concerns is precisely because the sculpture itself is not artistically innovative. While the steel skeleton was a bold new idea, Bartholdi did not go against artistic convention with his sculpture, as did his painting and sculpting contemporaries, like Manet and Rodin. Rather, Bartholdi embraced popular desires and gave the people what they wanted. Partially because the Statue of Liberty was paid for by people's donations, Bartholdi could not create a piece like Claes Oldenburg's *Free Stamp* (1986) and expect to win overwhelming support from the citizens of two nations. At the same time, Bartholdi did not want to create an Oldenburg. Bartholdi's style was definitely classical, and the Statue of Liberty with her torch aloft and broken chains at her feet clearly presents this style. What image could be more classical than a woman wearing a robe? But it is because Bartholdi was not innovative like Rodin, whose *Burghers of Calais*

went on exhibition at the same time the Statue of Liberty was officially given to the United States in a Paris ceremony in 1884, that the Statue is remembered today and Bartholdi is often little more than one chapter in a book on the statue. While Bartholdi's artistic style made many people happy, as they were given exactly what they wanted, and made Bartholdi a good deal of money, it is not considered artistically significant. The Statue of Liberty, both because it celebrates the 200-plus year friendship between France and the United States and because the statue epitomizes the idea of "liberty," that basic human desire to be able to live and breathe free from oppression, remains more significant than its creator.

Today, 128 years after Bartholdi got his first glimpse of the United States at New York Harbor, his Statue of Liberty still stands on the very island he picked out—Bedloe's, now Liberty, Island. The statue has been used in innumerable images for public consumption. War Bond posters of World War I used the symbol of Franco-American friendship to stir American support for a stalemated battle in northeast France. Films like *Independence Day*, which conveniently has the statue destroyed by alien invaders, are used to stir the complacent Americans into action. Ironically, even though the statue is one of the most recognizable images on Earth, it is rarely considered artistically significant. The advent of the modernist movement in art places innovation and newness above the previously important concern of ability. The whole concept behind "Outsider Art," for example Henry Rousseau's compositions of the 1890s, relies on the untrained producing new types of images for the public and art world to consume. Bartholdi is not a modernist; he is a classicist. While he uses modern construction techniques in the Statue of Liberty---a steel skeleton, for example---and gives Liberty a modern role, leading with her torch, she was created and sculpted in a classical style. But as a classical sculpture of an undefinable concept, Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty has the potential to mean many things to many people. While Bartholdi has essentially been separated from his piece, the Statue of Liberty has come to mean so much to so many people that probably no other sculpture can approach its significance.

NOTES

¹One source (New York Public Library) also indicated that one reason Bartholdi does not hold a place amongst the great sculptors of all time is because he was not collected. Apparently when Bartholdi died nearly every model and preliminary sketch for every piece he did was still in his studio.

² Germany occupied the formerly French regions of Alsace and Lorraine until after World War I. The area had always been a mixture of French and German natives, yet in losing the region to Germany in 1870, Alsace-Lorraine became a rallying cry for France. In World War I, France actually attempted to invade Germany through the rough, hilly terrain that makes up the region, leaving the northern areas of France, particularly near Belgium, open to invasion by Germany. Bartholdi always considered his hometown an occupied territory and rarely returned there after 1870.

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