

An American Symbol & its Classical Context: The Statue of Liberty

Frederic Auguste Bartholdi (1834-1904), Alsatian by birth, who designed & executed the colossal Statue of Liberty to link the republics of France and America and to honor the revolutions of both nations, drew upon colossal classical models to make a political statement in his own day.

The first model of the Statue of Liberty was completed in 1870, with the finished statue projected for the American centennial, but only the arm and torch were ready by 1876 (and were displayed at the Philadelphia World Exposition). The full statue, paid for with money raised in France, was shipped to the US in 1885. The inner metal frame had been designed by Alexandre Eiffel & the pedestal was eventually paid for with money raised by Joseph Pulitzer.

France had returned to monarchy after Napoleon, then to elections in 1848, but Napoleon III's coup kept him in sole power until his ouster. By 1865, Bartholdi & his friends were supporting the Republican cause, giving him reason to want to create a colossal Liberty, the classical antecedents of which were three-fold:

(1) Liberty Personified in Female Form:

Eleutheria/Libertas had frequently been represented by Greeks and Romans, especially on coins (like those of Brutus and the Emperor Galba), holding a cap of liberty or a cornucopia. Augustus had rebuilt the Temple of Liberty in Rome originally built by Ti. Sempronius Gracchus in 214) and Clodius' erection of a similar temple on the site of Cicero's house was (in)famous. Iconographic handbooks (like Reeper's of 1593) passed along to later times pictures of types; his showed Libertas wearing a liberty cap, holding a broken yoke, a bird flying off and a cat (considered independent and tenacious) by her side. Nineteenth century paintings (1848: "Republic Lighting the World") and sculptures ("Immortality") of virtues/abstraction were normally female. In Delacroix's famous painting "Liberty Guiding the People", Lady Liberty wears a red Phrygian cap, but the liberty cap, as early as an 1830 American painting, was too much associated with the abolitionists to be a good symbol for America as a whole.

(2) Colossal Size:

Bartholdi was fascinated by the colossal in antiquity and intended his Liberty to be the eighth wonder of the world, rivaling the seven of antiquity. He had himself carved a lion out of a hillside. Particularly influential on his conception of the Statue of Liberty were the bronze Colossos of Rhodes (representing Helios with a halo of rays around his head, a torch and spear and standing 110' high), the Pharos of Alexandria (built by Ptolemy 1 and 2 as a lighthouse to the nation of Egypt and the continent of Africa and topped by a statue of Zeus Soter, described by an Arab tourist in 1166 and destroyed by an earthquake in 1303), the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus and, for precedent of a large statue of a goddess, the Athena Parthenos at 38' high. The Colossus of Rhodes, built between 294-282 BC at the entrance to the island's harbor, destroyed in an earthquake in 226 BC and the pieces carted off 900 years later by the Arabs, had been intended as a lighthouse, and Athena Parthenos on the Acropolis was visible to ships coming to Athens' harbor. Bartholdi, who had scouted the New York coast & indicated his choice of site, intended the Statue of Liberty as a lighthouse for New York harbor (and the continent), but the torch light was not bright enough and subsequent efforts to make it brighter failed.

(3) Details of Appearance:

Much of the appearance of the Statue of Liberty derived from copies of the Athena Parthenos, especially as described by a Frenchman in 1876 as showing asexual androgyny and virginal maternity, and by descriptions of the statue of Hera at Argos. Bartholdi idolized but feared his mother, who had driven one of his brothers from his wife and another insane, and gave her features to his composition. The Statue of Liberty is reminiscent of the ancient standing goddess type, greater than life-size, with leg bent, holding a scepter aloft in one hand and a bowl in the other, as in the Hera Barberini, with its broad diadem, known from many Roman copies. The tautness of posture and drapery of the Juno Farnese seems echoed in the Statue of Liberty, and it had been reconstructed with the right arm raised holding something aloft and the left arm down. Around Liberty's feet are broken chains, symbolizing freedom, but these can only be seen from above.

Bartholdi's original design (not used) for the pedestal derived from the the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, which was 140' high, with a podium, colonnade and a statue atop a truncated pyramid, a Masonic symbol (see the back of a dollar bill) and Bartholdi was a Mason. The pedestal actually used was designed by the American Richard Morris Hunt.

The whole project took about 10 years to complete from design and fabrication in France to erection, after fund-raising in both countries, in New York. The statue's somewhat generalized meaning to us now differs from Bartholdi's more immediate political meaning for his republican cause during the Franco-Prussian War.