

MAKING A UNIVERSAL SYMBOL

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THE  
STATUE OF LIBERTY  
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## Liberty as Image and Icon

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he Statue of Liberty has never aged. Rather, Liberty has successfully adapted herself to a multitude of causes and campaigns, to the many diverse expectations and goals with which she has been identified at various times in her history.

Cartoonists and writers have employed her image to support the liberalization of immigration laws, attack the inadequacies of government, condemn war, mobilize sympathy for the poor, and advocate or condemn countless other causes. Business firms and manufacturers have used Liberty's image to market pears grown in California, introduce a new line of Parisian perfumes, advertise liquors, sell cheeses, and promote many other kinds of products (fig. 5.1). Liberty has graced the postage stamps of numerous countries of the world, even some ruled by dictatorships.

Yet the core symbolism of Liberty survives intact. Catalyst for the preoccupations and the woes of humankind, Liberty has served at one time or another as confessor, oracle, and keeper of the collective conscience of American society (and, indeed, of other societies overseas). Liberty is the premier monumental icon of modern times.



Fig. 5.1. "Liberty Enlightening the World as to the Best Six-Cord Thread in the Market." Businesses used mass advertising and the image of Liberty to bolster the appeal of their products. In this advertising card (c. 1885), the Merrick Thread Company touts its cotton sewing thread. The statue's likeness was used in advertisements even before the monument itself was opened in October 1886. Reprinted from the Warshaw Collection, by permission of the Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

If Liberty had been simply a work that a group of men created a century ago, and her significance had been limited to that fact, she would be just another tourist attraction—a monument to a time past, a relic of bygone years. Yet Liberty's symbolic force, and the devotion that is lavished on her by her admirers, simply grow stronger with the passage of time. What accounts for the power of her image and her message?

Two aspects of the Statue of Liberty—one external, a set of circumstances; the other internal, a set of intrinsic qualities—can provide an explanation for her symbolic impact. The first involves the events of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, each of which has added rich new dimensions to her meaning. The second reflects the depth of Liberty's visual representation and imagery.

The impressive development of the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century made a strong impression in countries throughout the world. America's incredible economic expansion, the dynamism and

drive of its complex society, and the prosperity and progress that seemed to characterize the nation at that time fascinated people everywhere.

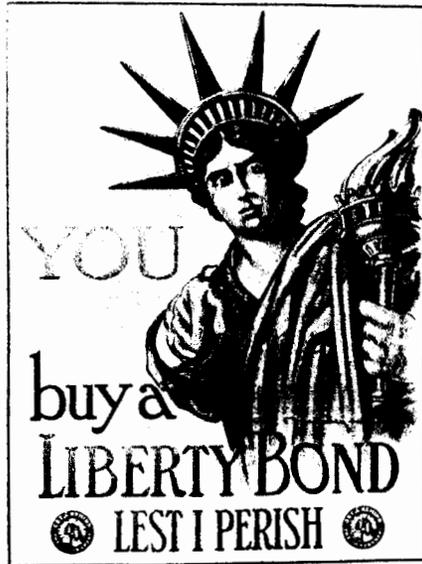
Yet the enormous economic growth was not achieved without cost. Social and economic conflicts multiplied, as did wealth. Vast industrial complexes and corporations emerged, and so, too, did problems of labor management and labor strife. Industrial strikes and political struggles between workers and the owners of industry developed in many places. In the early years of Liberty's installation in New York Harbor, she came to symbolize the dynamism and prosperity of America's free society. As industrial conflict escalated, however, the statue took on the opposite meaning in some quarters. Critics debunked Liberty as irrelevant to the aspirations of workers and to the ongoing struggle over economic justice. A 1912 illustration in the British periodical *Puck* captured this disillusionment by showing Liberty dethroned by King Dollar, who was represented by a golden calf.

When World War I began, Liberty acquired yet another set of meanings. At the initiative of Herbert Hoover, then director of a federal agency known as the American Relief Administration (and later president of the country), the Statue of Liberty was enlisted alongside the images of Uncle Sam and Columbia in advertisements for the sale of war bonds. The statue became a mascot for those endeavoring to rally citizens to the war effort (fig. 5.2).

Liberty as a symbol of American patriotism was revived in 1940, during World War II. The Allied victory was, above all, a victory of democracy over dictatorship and totalitarianism. So the symbolism of the statue was reshaped to depict the march of progress among democratic governments throughout the world. The spread of democracy has repeatedly been linked to the Statue of Liberty.

A dramatic example of Liberty's recurring democratic symbolism arose in June 1989 in Beijing, China—not in a society that had adopted democracy but rather among a people who had embraced, against great odds, the aspiration of living in a free society. The student-led movement for democracy in Beijing's Tiananmen Square was marked by the construction from Styrofoam plastic and plaster of a replica of the Statue of Liberty that came to be known as the Goddess of Democracy. One such statue was erected near the site of the student uprising; others were placed at the United Nations in

Fig. 5.2. "You Buy a Liberty Bond Lest I Perish." C. R. Macauley's poster was used in the government's first Liberty Loan campaign in 1917, encouraging citizens to help pay for American participation in World War I. It was during this period that the image of Liberty was first linked to pro-war and patriotic feelings, appearing on advertisements and billboards everywhere—and nearly displacing the other popular image used for such purposes, that of Uncle Sam. Reprinted by permission of National Park Service, Statue of Liberty National Monument.



New York, in front of the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C., and in Europe. Each of these Chinese renderings of Liberty served as a rallying point for democratic reform. The Chinese Goddess of Democracy demonstrated once again the evolving symbolism of Liberty—not simply as an embodiment of personal freedom but as the representation of the spirit of a free society and of self-government.

Yet despite the Statue of Liberty's great popularity during many of the last hundred years, in the two decades immediately following the unveiling in New York Harbor in October 1886, popular interest in the statue declined. The events of that era before World War I—the technological and economic breakthroughs, in particular—diverted public attention from the statue and its democratic symbolism. One new area of interest proved to be the transportation advances of flying machines and automobiles. Another was urban growth and the building of skyscrapers. America's westward movement also gained prominence in the popular imagination. This trend of growing indifference to Liberty, however, was soon to be halted in a decisive way.

Liberty was poised for a remarkable transformation, owing to the statue's location on Bedloe's Island in New York Harbor. The great drama of European immigration, which had been gathering momentum during the latter half of the nineteenth century, once again thrust the Statue of Liberty into the center of national and international attention. Of all the external conditions that have impinged upon Liberty, the most powerful, it can be argued, has been the statue's link to European emigration.

Millions of women, men, and children, driven from their homelands by war, poverty, famine, and political oppression, came to the United States in a massive wave that lasted for several decades. Until 1892, immigrants arriving in New York Harbor were taken to Castle Garden, at the foot of Manhattan. But after 1892, when the immigration depot was opened at Ellis Island, next to the island where Liberty stood, the statue acquired an even deeper meaning for the millions of European immigrants who came to America's shores.

Imagine the effect that this colossal structure, the Statue of Liberty, must have had on those arriving in New York Harbor, seeking a new world and a new life! Liberty, after all, was the culmination of their hopes and dreams. For these refugees, who had lost or abandoned all that they once had had, who were exhausted from the ordeal of an extremely difficult ocean crossing, who were thrown together in confusion, speaking so many different languages, arrival in America seems to have been transfixed by Liberty's nurturing and protective visage—the very picture of strength, determination, and serenity.

The other element that explains Liberty's universal appeal is its rich, evocative imagery. The Statue of Liberty's symbolic strength exists apart from its status as a work of art. As distinguished art critic Harold Rosenberg once observed, "[T]he things that are important in a work of art and in a monument are not necessarily the same." It is therefore more worthwhile to probe the mystery of Liberty's appeal as a symbol than to evaluate the statue as a work of art. The aesthetic appeal of Liberty is not entirely the result of the formal structure; it also derives from the purely visual effects. To be sure, the physical fact of the statue is impressive. Yet of equal importance is the message that the Statue of Liberty expresses—in other words, what flows forth from her symbolically.

The thousands of transformations that the statue has under-



Fig. 5.3. "Liberty Feeding the World." This lithograph, an early-twentieth-century advertisement of a brand of cookies, "Famous Sea Foam Wafers," by the Holmes and Coutts Company of New York, depicts one of many product advertisements that have made use of the image of the Statue of Liberty. Reprinted by permission of Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

gone at the whims of illustrators and cartoonists demonstrate the remarkable adaptability of Liberty's image to the multiplicity of causes with which it has been identified. Liberty, indeed, has proved to be a powerful catalyst for the human imagination (fig. 5.3).

Two anecdotes associated with the statue's creator, Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, and its builder, Emile Gaget, illustrate the range of symbolic and representational uses of Liberty's image. Bartholdi had taken pains to secure for himself all the legal rights to the design of the statue that he had created, thereby ensuring that he alone would hold the patent and reap the benefits from the future private and commercial uses of his design. His foresight paid off handsomely. Even before the official debut of the Statue of Liberty in October 1886, her image had been appropriated as a logo or insignia for every manner of business and commercial use.



Fig. 5.4. "Let the Advertising Agents Take Charge of the Bartholdi Business." This cartoon, from a *Puck* magazine of the early 1880s, caricatures the promotional interest of businesses in tying the image of Liberty to their products. However, the cartoon also reflects widespread concern about another issue—the difficulty in raising funds for the pedestal—and suggests the sale of advertising rights to the statue as a source of revenue. By the end of 1885, after an intense public relations drive, the public had responded sufficiently. Reprinted by permission of National Park Service, Statue of Liberty National Monument.

A *Puck* magazine cartoon of the early 1880s captures a double meaning in the commercialization of Liberty (fig. 5.4). At one level, the cartoon satirizes Bartholdi's instinct for the commercial value of his statue—and the hold that Liberty would exert on the popular imagination. At another level, however, the cartoon depicts a financial problem that nearly blocked the scheduled opening of the statue. Funds were in short supply for building the pedestal on which Liberty would stand; at the time, the statue consisted of hundreds of separate pieces, stored in crates, awaiting assembly. The cartoon hints at a solution to the funding shortage: raise money from businessmen by selling advertising rights for their products. Happily, by the end of 1885 sufficient funds had been raised to complete both the statue and its pedestal.

The other anecdote involves Emile Gaget, in whose Paris workshop the statue was constructed. For a trip to New York, it is said, Gaget packed a large number of miniature reproductions of Liberty, which he proceeded to sell and distribute. In French, Gaget's name is pronounced "ga-zhay," but in English, the name is

pronounced “gadget,” and he subsequently became identified with the small souvenirs and novelty devices that are now known as gadgets.

Both of these stories convey the Statue of Liberty’s supple imagery and iconographic riches, which have been enjoyed by people in many different circumstances and walks of life.

Throughout Liberty’s history, her image has been at times exalted, at other times exalting. At times she has seemed dynamic, at other times static. Liberty, it appears, has been buffeted not just by the harsh winds of New York Harbor but also by changing public moods and styles, by clashes of will and purpose, and by unpredictable events. Yet onlookers have insisted upon humanizing her, investing in her their concerns of the moment, appealing to her for relief and remedy, and transferring to her their wishes and hopes.

Alongside Liberty’s unmatched adaptability is her timelessness, her superlative presence that seems to transcend any particular historical age, place, or set of events. Liberty’s enduring quality derives also from the evocative nature of her pose. Her gesture of striding forward and holding high the torch of liberty has taken on a symbolic significance all its own. In this magnificent gesture the Statue of Liberty rises above the pettiness and parochialism of everyday life, above the limits of the human condition itself. The Statue of Liberty is, indeed, the supreme symbol for all those who refuse to accept the inevitability of fate and who cherish freedom.

## NOTE

This essay is an adaptation of the address originally presented at the Cooper-Hewitt Colloquium, held on October 19, 1985.

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## Everybody’s Gal

### Women, Boundaries, and Monuments

BARBARA A. BABCOCK AND JOHN J. MACALOON

*Women have entered into systems of representation only as the representation of something else, as justice, liberty, philosophy, or indeed some less abstract more human objectification of men’s desire.*

—JOANNA HODGE, *Feminism and Post-Modernism*

*Woman is then the very ground of representation, both object and support of a desire which, intimately bound up with power and creativity, is the moving force of culture and history.*

—TERESA DELAURETIS, *Alice Doesn’t*

October 28, 1986, was the official centennial of the unveiling of the most famous female statue in the world. “Our fair lady” has been described as not only the most “prodigious structure of maternity” but also “the single most seductive structure” that Western man has ever erected.<sup>1</sup> She was, until the Russians raised their statue of the Motherland at Stalingrad after World War II, the world’s largest female monument. In the words of one speaker at her 1886 debut, “Miss Liberty will always be the most beautiful lady in America.”

Liberty’s centennial birthday was a star-spangled extravaganza celebrated on the weekend of July 4, 1986—Independence Day.