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exhibition review of

_Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York_

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Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York

Reviewed by Caterina Y. Pierre

Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York
Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration, New York
October 18, 2019–September 13, 2020

In February of 2020, before the world knew of COVID-19 and the difficult times that lay before us, I found myself running around New York to see the museum exhibitions that were soon to end their runs. Given my particular interest in nineteenth-century sculpture, I was drawn to Ellis Island’s National Museum of Immigration for the exhibition Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York, which had opened the previous October and was to end in April. (Due to COVID-19, the exhibition was extended until September 13, 2020). Held inside the former Dormitory Rooms above the Registry Room (Great Hall) at Ellis Island (fig. 1), the presentation focused primarily on two sculptures, the first of which was the Liberty of Poetry (1861–83), an allegorical figure created by the Italian artist Pio Fedi (1815–92). The original sculpture is placed on the tomb of the Italian poet and playwright Giovanni Battista Niccolini (1782–1861) at the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence, Italy. The second sculpture at the core of this exhibition was Liberty Enlightening the World (1865–86), otherwise known as the “Statue of Liberty,” by Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi (1834–1904), a work situated in New York harbor right outside of the exhibition. At a glance, Fedi’s sculpture looks very familiar: some have suggested that it was the inspiration for Bartholdi’s work. While evidence for that claim is lacking, it is true that these sister sculptures, though born to different fathers, share between them symbols associated with the allegorical mother spirit of Liberty.

Fig. 1, Entryway to the exhibition Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York, Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration, New York. [view image & full caption]

Giuseppe De Micheli, Paola Vojnovic (Opera di Santa Croce), and Ann and David Wilkins (Duquesne University Program of Rome) curated the exhibition. Numerous institutions joined forces to produce it: the National Park Service/Statue of Liberty National Monument
and Ellis Island; Kent State University; the US Consulate General in Florence; the Italian Consulate General in New York; the Garibaldi Meucci Museum; and the Union League Legacy Foundation. No catalogue was published for this exhibition.

Neither sculpture could actually be placed within the *Sisters in Liberty* exhibition. *Liberty Enlightening the World* had to be left out in the harbor for obvious reasons, and the *Liberty of Poetry* could not be detached from Niccolini’s tomb at Santa Croce and sent to New York. For the former sculpture, viewers would get the best view of the sculpture on their way to or from Ellis Island via the ferry. For the latter, a 3D-printed resin replica was produced at eighty percent scale, at a height of almost ten feet, and weighing 551 pounds (fig. 2). Created by the Design Innovation Initiative and other partners at Kent State University, it served as a sculptural proxy. One wonders, in retrospect, if this was a test run for a larger project currently underway in Florence, a planned 3D-printed replica of Michelangelo’s *David* for Expo 2020–21 in Dubai.[1] It is a feat to mount an exhibition that does not include within it the two sculptures at its center, but the 3-D printed *Liberty of Poetry* was well produced, more pleasing to look at than other such objects I have seen since the invention of this technology, and impressive in its ability to capture fine details. As for *Liberty Enlightening the World*, there’s nothing like the real thing, which was right outside.

![Fig. 2, Three-dimensional printed replica after Pio Fedi’s *Liberty of Poetry*, 1861–83.](view image & full caption)

The artist of the *Liberty of Poetry*, Pio Fedi, was born in Viterbo and received his formative education at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence, where he studied with Raffaello Morghen (1758–1833), Giovita Garavaglia (1790–1835), and Lorenzo Bartolini (1777–1850).[2] His early Neoclassical-style works, such as his *Saint Sebastian* (1844, Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Palazzo Pitti, Florence), were associated with the Italian Purism (sometimes called the “Florentinism”) movement of the 1840s. Fedi received a number of important commissions for the city of Florence in the later 1840s and 1850s, including sculptures depicting the artist Niccolò Pisano (1845–49) and the physician Andrea Cesalpino (1854) for the façade of the Galleria degli Uffizi; a large monument to the sculptor Pietro Torrigiani (1857); and his most well-known work, the *Sacrifice of Polyxena* (1855–66), a subtle reference to the Austrian occupation of Piedmont, placed at the Loggia dei Lanzi in December of 1866.
Fedi began to conceive of the *Liberty of Poetry* soon after the death of Niccolini in 1861, and Bartholdi was working on his *Statue of Progress*, the precedent for the *Liberty Enlightening the World*, for the entrance to the Suez Canal in 1865. Whether the two artists knew each other, or each other’s works, is uncertain. Bartholdi was in Italy for a short visit in the spring of 1865, and he made stops in Naples, Pompeii, Rome, Bastia, Livorno, and Genoa.\[^3\] The exhibition suggested that Bartholdi and Fedi could have met at one of the salons hosted by Emilia Toscanelli Peruzzi (1827–1900) in Florence between 1865 and 1870 but gives no evidence for this statement. According to the exhibition’s press release, “many believe that Bartholdi was inspired by Fedi’s drawings when he was in Florence in the 1860s during the Franco-Prussian War [sic].”\[^4\] This is obviously incorrect because the Franco-Prussian War occurred in 1870–71. It is not completely clear how much work Fedi had completed on the *Liberty of Poetry* by the mid-1860s that was available to the public, or to other artists. Fedi was also fully occupied by the *Polyxena* commission for the first half of the 1860s. Additionally, Bartholdi’s biographers actually make no mention of a visit to Florence at all; this does not mean Bartholdi did not visit the city, but if he did, he cared so little about seeing this glorious city of sculpture that he failed to mention it in any writings or correspondence.

Both Bartholdi and Fedi, however, had access to numerous allegories and personifications of Liberty created by thousands of artists working across the globe at mid-century. Both of their sculptures also functioned as public allegorical works usually did in that era: they served to attract a mostly uneducated, mass audience to the ideas and ideals of liberty over which Americans and Europeans debated and fought. These sculptors used allegorical sculpture to push forward the ideals of freedom with a dramatic flair that seems to have dissipated from most contemporary public sculpture today. In what seems to be our pronounced detachment from the past, we have not looked towards such allegories to uplift us and sustain our dreams for a more equitable future. While allegories fell out of favor among sculptors at the beginning of the twentieth century, allegorical works can still promote a universality that men on horses, for example, noticeably lack. A return to allegory, symbolism, and universal messaging in public sculpture, though, might return: Vinnie Bagwell’s proposed *Victory Beyond Sims* (2018–in progress), set to fill the spot in Central Park where the now-removed sculpture of physician J. Marion Sims was once installed, may mark the return of allegory in contemporary public sculpture.\[^5\]

In the exhibition proper, *Sisters in Liberty* began with a short film about Santa Croce in Florence, a high-production endeavor that works to transport the visitor to the monumental complex (fig. 3). Large panels with text constituted the backdrop for the exhibition and its aims (fig. 4). In the second room just after the film, large panels included information regarding the celebrated individuals who are honored at Santa Croce (fig. 5), including Saint Francis of Assisi (1181/1182–1226); Dante Alighieri (1265–1321); Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868); Galileo Galilei (1564–1642); Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564); and Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527). The film and these panels at the start of the exhibition provided further historical context on Santa Croce’s cultural heritage and were especially important for armchair travelers who may not have visited Santa Croce in person.
In the third room, visitors were presented with two objects borrowed from the Garibaldi Meucci Museum on Staten Island (fig. 6). The first was a photograph of Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807–82), the Italian general who arguably made the largest contribution to the Italian unification movement known as the Risorgimento. The second item was a camicie rosse (red shirt) of the type worn by Garibaldi’s fighters. This version of the shirt was made for and presented as a gift to Garibaldi in 1870. Additionally, the symbolism of the Italian turrito (turreted crown) is explored here (figs. 7, 8). Italia Turrita, meaning literally “Italy crowned with turrets,” is based on ancient and medieval precedents. Three 3-D printed turriti from the monuments to Dante Alighieri, Prince Neri Corsini, and Vittorio Alfieri at Santa Croce are included here. Neither Bartholdi nor Fedi’s Liberty figures has the turrito, because they do
not represent the personification of Italy. Yet it was still useful and instructive to have this information here.

Fig. 6, Top: Photograph of Giuseppe Garibaldi; bottom: Commemorative camicie rosse, ca. 1870. [view image & full caption]

Fig. 7, On left: Three-dimensional printed replica after Stefano Ricci’s Monument to Dante Alighieri, 1830. [view image & full caption]

Fig. 8, Three-dimensional printed replica after Antonio Canova’s Monument to Vittorio Alfieri, 1810. [view image & full caption]

A bust of Abraham Lincoln made by Fedi was included in the fourth room, on loan from the Union League Legacy Foundation of Philadelphia (figs. 9, 10). The work, signed and dated “Florence, 1865,” exemplifies nicely the interest that Fedi had in the fight for liberty across the Atlantic. At the time when Fedi made his memorial to Lincoln, Italians may have seen the reunification of the United States after the Civil War as a prefiguring of their own hopes for self-determination. I am fairly certain that there are few works by Fedi in the United States, so it was a particular treat to view this marble sculpture in New York. It was also the only original fine artwork in the exhibition; no original works by Bartholdi were included. I found this to be an odd omission since I suspect something authentic by Bartholdi could have been borrowed from the Statue of Liberty Museum nearby. A reduction of Liberty Enlightening the World might have been useful here to provide the visitor with another reference to the sculpture outside, as well as a reduction of Bartholdi’s Lafayette and
Washington (1890, bronze and Hauteville marble, Manhattan Avenue and 114th Street, Manhattan, New York), or of the Marquis de Lafayette in Union Square (1876, bronze and Quincy granite), which would have reminded the audience that Bartholdi made other works destined for and placed in New York.

Niccolini was a significant literary figure whose writings literally set the stage for Italian self-determination a new national identity. Italian historian Alberto Mario Banti included Niccolini’s tragedies Giovanni da Procida (1817) and Arnaldo da Brecia (1840) in his canonical list of foundational Italian texts created by mid-century.[6] Profits from the sales of Niccolini’s Poesie nazionale (National Poems, 1859) supported the War of Italian Independence of 1859. Niccolini’s Storia della casa di Svevia (History of the Swabian Dynasty, 1873) focused on the enlightened rule of the Emperor Frederick II. Three-dimensional printed details from the Liberty of Poetry included a stack of books shown in a separate display case in the fifth room of the exhibition (figs. 11, 12, 13). I was very appreciative of this addition, since at the original Liberty of Poetry it is nearly impossible to see the titles of the four books included on the monument because of the sculpture’s height.
In the sixth and final room of the exhibition, the 3-D printed *Liberty of Poetry* holds center stage (figs. 2, 14). The resin replica was impressive: smooth in surface treatment and tinted to match the original, the 3D-printed version did justice to Fedi’s design. While on the surface both sculptures attended to here seem very similar, the more one studies them, the more one finds significant differences between them. They do share three symbolic elements with many other allegories of liberty: classical garments; broken chains, depicted in both under the feet; and radiating rays of light perforating their crowns. But beyond these similarities, the two sisters symbolically part ways. A raised right arm connects them, but this element would also connect these sculptures to countless other images of liberty holding up items in the right hand, such as a lance with a liberty cap, a light, a staff, or a sword. Both share elements that would have been common among images of liberty and related to emblems described (and later illustrated) by Cesare Ripa in 1593.[7] The addition of the harp, Niccolini’s famous publications in a stack on the ground, and the connection to the poet
through his relief portrait in the background, are related to the sculpture’s symbolic connection to poetry and create clear differences between the two works.

Fig. 14, Three-dimensional printed replica after Pio Fedi’s *Liberty of Poetry*, side view, 1861–83.

In this final room of the exhibition, visitors also found an interactive digital board, called the “Listening Wall,” which provided access to music, poetry, inspiring political speeches, and images related to the fostering of liberty and democracy in both Italy and the United States. The project was provided by the “Traveling Stanzas” initiative of Kent State University’s Wick Poetry Center College of Arts and Sciences.[8] The digital board had many texts to choose from; I enjoyed a speech read by Fiorello La Guardia and music sung by Enrico Caruso (fig. 15). It was also possible to speak into the board to record reflections on liberty, and create poetry using the digital texts on the board for future visitors to read.

Fig. 15, Installation image showing the “Listening Wall,” created by the “Traveling Stanzas” initiative of Kent State University’s Wick Poetry Center, College of Arts and Sciences.

The *Sisters in Liberty* exhibition might have been short on the glitz and glamour of the big contemporary blockbusters of the fall of 2019, but it was long on timeliness. *Sisters in Liberty* opened during the same month as the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, an elaborate affair that attracted legions of visitors; The Shed’s *Agnes Denes: Absolutes and Intermediates*, complete with newly commissioned works and the promise of more public art
by Denes to come; and the grand re-reopening of the Museum of Modern Art, its second unveiling in under two decades. Yet *Sisters in Liberty* tackled something these other presentations did not: the topical question of what liberty meant to all of us in 2020. The humblest of exhibitions had engaged with one of the most profound question of our times.

Visitors were reminded by this exhibition that one must fight continuously for democratic freedom and personal liberty. A large panel depicting a tree, with leaves containing words related to liberty and democracy, was included towards the end of the exhibition (fig. 16). A mother and child visited the exhibition while I was there, and the child had a grand time picking out words they could read from the tree and playing with the “Listening Wall” at the end of the exhibition. Like the artworks under study themselves, the show was family friendly and explained heady concepts symbolically to an audience who might not yet be able to grasp them.

![Fig. 16, Installation image of metadata (“Tree of Liberty”) in Room 5 of *Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York*, Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration, New York.](image)

A collective and sustained effort is required to obtain and maintain one’s freedom, and to achieve the breaking of one’s chains, a symbol prominently displayed in both sculptures. The Italians achieved their liberty from Austria, France, Spain, and the Vatican in the nineteenth century, and since that time they have made continual progress. Today in the United States, the positive gains achieved over three centuries by the American Revolution, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights movement seemed to be slipping fast from the people’s grasp. The liberty sculptures, taken together, are physical reminders of past and future challenges in both countries. Imagine the power that this exhibition had related to its timing, that is, mounted and held during the eleven months just before the 2020 presidential election. It created a space for intelligent thinking based on concepts of liberty, freedom, and democracy at just the right moment.

If *Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York* was meant to show how similar the two Liberty figures by Bartholdi and Fedi were, or to prove that Bartholdi directly borrowed elements from Fedi’s design, it did not succeed. The evidence was just not there. But if the exhibition was meant to confirm the importance of such allegorical sculptures to create an emotive pride in one’s newly established nation, to provide a gateway to establishing self-
determination, and to promote democracy and liberty as a humanitarian concept, then the exhibition was successful beyond a doubt.

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Notes


[8] There is a website explaining the “Listening Wall” on the internet, but the selections provided on the digital board at the exhibition are not (or not any longer) included there, https://listeningtoliberty.as.kent.edu.
Illustrations

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Fig. 2, Three-dimensional printed replica after Pio Fedi’s *Liberty of Poetry*, 1861–83. Resin. Created by the Design Innovation Initiative, College of Arts and Sciences, Kent State University, 2019. Photo © Caterina Y. Pierre, 2020. [return to text]
Fig. 4, Installation image of metadata in Room 1 of *Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York*, Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration, New York. Photo © Caterina Y. Pierre, 2020.

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Fig. 5, Installation image of metadata in Room 1 of *Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York*, Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration, New York. Photo © Caterina Y. Pierre, 2020.

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Fig. 6, Top: Photograph of Giuseppe Garibaldi; bottom: Commemorative camici rosse, ca. 1870. Both in the collection of the Garibaldi Meucci Museum, Staten Island, New York. Photo © Caterina Y. Pierre, 2020. [return to text]
Fig. 8, Three-dimensional printed replica after Antonio Canova’s *Monument to Vittorio Alfieri*, 1810. Resin. Created by the Design Innovation Initiative, College of Arts and Sciences, Kent State University, 2019. Photo © Caterina Y. Pierre, 2020. [return to text]
Fig. 9, Installation image of Pio Fedi’s *Bust of Abraham Lincoln*, 1865, with metadata in Room 4 of *Sisters in Liberty: From Florence, Italy to New York, New York*, Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration, New York. Photo © Caterina Y. Pierre, 2020. [return to text]
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Fig. 14, Three-dimensional printed replica after Pio Fedi’s *Liberty of Poetry*, side view, 1861–83. Resin. Created by the Design Innovation Initiative, College of Arts and Sciences, Kent State University, 2019. Photo © Caterina Y. Pierre, 2020. [return to text]
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