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Cracks Found In the Myths Around Statue; Park Service Librarian Writes Book to Clarify Lady Liberty's Origins

By GLENN COLLINS

Here are just a few of the things that many New Yorkers swear they know about the Statue of Liberty:

Lady Liberty was created by the sculptor Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi and presented as a gift from the French nation to the people of New York. It was designed to be a female personification of American freedom to welcome immigrants and salute them with the famous words of the Emma Lazarus poem, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." The pennies of schoolchildren paid for the pedestal so the statue could be erected on Liberty Island.

Sorry! Not exactly.

A newly published harvest of scholarly research suggests that many commonly held notions about the monument are only a part of the whole truth.

For example, the father of Lady Liberty was actually the not-terribly-well-remembered French author and politician, Edouard de Laboulaye. There is evidence that the supposed gift was something of a diplomatic maneuver, a bid for trade advantage, and a celebration of democracy intended to sway internal French politics.

Furthermore, scholars say that the statue was originally intended to be an anti-monarchy, antislavery symbol. Immigrants, and the Lazarus poem, were not popularly connected with the statue until the 20th century.

Much of the money for the 154-foot-high pedestal and foundation came from wealthy donors and the monument was in fact erected on 12.7-acre Bedloes Island (renamed Liberty Island in 1956).

Not to mention that many scholars believe that "the statue is a visual representation of a Roman goddess," said Barry Moreno, a National Park Service librarian at the Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island.

"In fact, 120 years ago, Roman Catholics objected to New Yorkers making obeisance to a 151-foot-high heathen goddess smack in the middle of New York Harbor," Mr. Moreno said.

Then there's the debate over whether Miss Liberty was originally intended to be a black woman; more on that later.

Mr. Moreno, 34, has spent five years researching and writing a new illustrated book, "The Statue of Liberty Encyclopedia" (Simon & Schuster). His job on Ellis Island, which is part of the national monument, is to delve into the monument's archives.

The book reflects his own work as well as the research of others who have long studied the statue. Although the encyclopedia presents no single discovery to invalidate previous beliefs about Lady Liberty, Mr. Moreno's patient excavations provide not only a fuller picture of the statue's origins but a broader understanding of its symbolic history.

"The statue's whole history has been mystified and mythified," said Dr. Albert Boime, a professor of art history at the University of California at Los Angeles and one of the scholars whose work is incorporated in the book.

For example, "the main myth was that this was simply a gift of the French people to the American people," Dr. Boime said. "As a gift, it was more accurately an instrument of statecraft on the French and American sides, intended to heighten interest in trade and to call attention to French technology."

Furthermore, the statue's message "was aimed at the French, since it was one way to promote opposition to Napoleon III," said Dr. Marvin Trachtenberg, Kitzmiller professor of art history at New York University. Napoleon ruled at the time of the initial discussions about the statue, in the mid-1860's.

Dr. Wilton S. Dillon, senior scholar emeritus for the Smithsonian Institution, said, "The omnipotence of the statue's image is such that it produces almost an amnesia about its origins."

It is true that Bartholdi (1834-1904) was "immensely important in the Lady Liberty story," Mr. Moreno said, since he created not only the image but also the monumental concept of the statue standing in New York harbor.

But "it was de Laboulaye who conceived it and put everything in motion," said Dr. Dillon, co-editor of "The Statue of Liberty Revisited: Making a Universal Symbol" (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994).

Laboulaye (1811-1883), an "Americanist" like Alexis de Tocqueville, hired Bartholdi to sculpture the monument. Scholars say he approved Bartholdi's clay models, and gave him introductions to Americans ranging from President Ulysses S. Grant to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to win acceptance for the statue.

Historical amnesia also seems to have affected the Lazarus poem. According to Mr. Moreno's book, "The New Colossus," though written in 1883 to help raise money for the pedestal, it was forgotten until it was rediscovered in a Manhattan bookshop; the text was inscribed on a tablet placed on the pedestal in 1903.

"Emma Lazarus's poem was not originally attached to the statue in the public mind," Dr. Boime said. "That would come with the waves of immigration after the turn of the century."

Mr. Moreno, who grew up in Los Angeles, is no stranger to the immigrant experience himself; his parents left Fidel Castro's Cuba. As a park ranger giving guided tours of the Statue of Liberty 12 years ago, "I gave the most accurate information I could," Mr. Moreno said. "But as I worked in the library through the years, and responded to inquiries and went through our research, a fuller story began to suggest itself."

Many Americans have little more than "a shallow overview" of the history of the Statue of Liberty, said the thin, intense Mr. Moreno on a recent afternoon, as he sat in the Ellis Island archive, which contains 4,000 books, 400 manuscripts and 10,000 photographic images. (The library is open by appointment on weekdays.)

Mr. Moreno said that the 560,000-pound statue, with its 42-foot arm and 21-foot torch, was controversial even before its 1886 inauguration ceremony. In 1880, the American Catholic Quarterly printed a denunciation of the goddess and her torch, contending they received light "not from Christ and Christianity, but from heathenism and her gods."

This objection surfaced because "ultimately the statue can be traced to Roman antiquity, there is no question about it," Dr. Boime said. Mr. Moreno's book presents evidence that an inspiration for the statue was the Roman goddess Libertas, the personification of liberty and personal freedom ordained by the Roman state.

It was wealthy Republicans, however, who raised much of the money for the pedestal, though the final \$102,000 came from working-class families who gave small donations in return for getting their names listed in Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper, The New York World.

"Pulitzer's support was not entirely a selfless patriotic act, given his concerns about circulation," said Dr. Boime, who examined the distortion of the image of the statue in a recent book, "The Unveiling of the National Icons: A Plea for Patriotic Iconoclasm in a Nationalist Era," (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Mr. Moreno's book offers much obscure information about the statue, devoting attention to its 3-foot-8-inch nose, 2-foot-6-inch eyes, and its interior armature designed by Alexandre Gustave Eiffel, engineer of the eponymous tower in Paris.

The tallest metal statue ever constructed -- believed to be bigger than the Colossus of Rhodes -- the monument "is one of those omnipresent symbols in the public consciousness," Dr. Trachtenberg said.

And through the decades, the statue's symbolic meaning has been transformed. When the United States became a world power after its defeat of Spain in the Spanish-American War, the statue began to represent American might -- and ultimately American imperialism -- in political cartoons, Mr. Moreno said.

In World War I, the monument first began to replace Columbia as the symbol of the nation. In the 1930's it became the "lady of hope" for new waves of refugees and immigrants. Soon it became an emblem of the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War; then, during World War II, the statue served as a ubiquitous democratic symbol.

Some Afrocentric groups contend that the statue was originally intended to depict a black. "It is an African monument," said Dr.

Leonard Jeffries Jr., a professor of African-American Studies at City College. He said his research showed that early models of the statue "were more Negroid," adding that "the idea of the black Statue of Liberty has been kept out" of historical accounts.

Dr. Trachtenberg, who wrote the text for the Statue of Liberty exhibition on Liberty Island and is the author of "The Statue of Liberty" (Viking, 1976), said: "I don't know of any evidence that it was supposed to be a black figure initially."

Dr. Boime of U.C.L.A. said that "I would have pursued that belief if it had any substance, but perhaps this is a reference to the model for Bartholdi's Suez project, which was the statue of a Nubian woman," which was never built.

In the end, the statue "is a big Rorschach test about ourselves," Dr. Dillon said. "It has been internalized now as part of our national iconography, and it has become our symbol of ourselves."

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