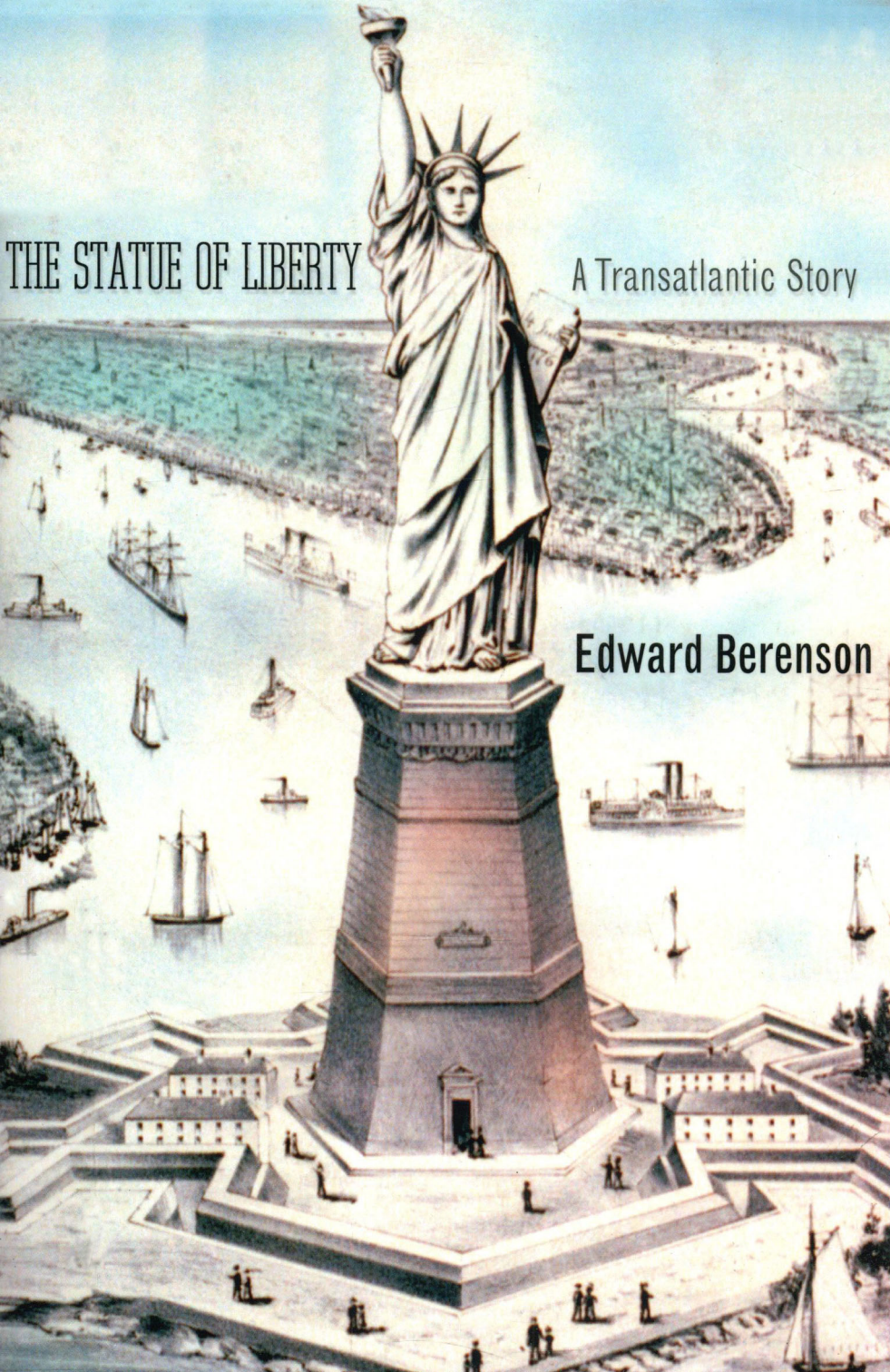


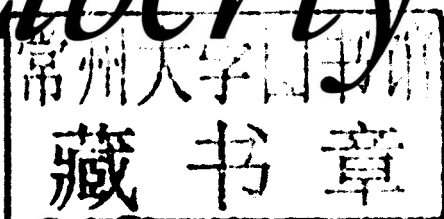
THE STATUE OF LIBERTY

A Transatlantic Story

Edward Berenson



of Liberty



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The Statue of Liberty

The Statue

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This book is dedicated to Catherine and to the memory of her parents, Robert Johnson (d. 2010) and Patricia Johnson (d. 2011), whose love, warmth, and generosity we will always miss.

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Prologue

It's a cold March morning, and I'm late for my 9:30 a.m. excursion to the Statue of Liberty. As I sprint toward the dock, hoping I'll make my boat, a solid wall of people stops me short. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of ticket holders are waiting to get onboard. The queue snakes around a maze of metal barriers; its destination is not the ferry but a huge bubble structure like those that cover tennis courts in chilly winter months. My ferry reservation is meaningless; it's the security officers inside who determine when people get on.

"Hats, belt, watches, wallets, coats, shoes. Hats, belts, watches, wallets, coats, shoes," I hear the officers chant as I'm finally admitted to the security bubble's relative warmth. I've spent a solid hour in the cold. About three million people visit Liberty Island every year, and even in winter they're willing to stand patiently, sometimes an entire morning, in the brisk air of Battery Park. Another thirty minutes go by before I'm finally invited to surrender my outerwear and metallic effects to the National Park Service's security routine.

It's hard to imagine a more tempting terrorist target than the Statue of Liberty. To destroy Lady Liberty would be to strike at the symbolic heart of the United States. It's more than painful enough to

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contemplate a Manhattan skyline rendered toothless by Al Qaeda's assault. Without the Statue of Liberty, New York Harbor would be damaged beyond emotional repair, a historical essence of America erased for good.

It would be a terrible loss not just for us, but also for the French, whose forebears had created the statue as a gift to the United States. One day, not long after 9/11, my then seven-year-old son was abruptly overcome by worry that someone would hit the statue next. What if terrorists fly an airplane into the Statue of Liberty, he asked my wife, his face betraying the fear that she would have no answer to give. As it turned out, he didn't need one. "The French people are so nice," he said, "they would make us a new one."

Inside the security station, I hear a great many French voices. The Statue of Liberty is a *de rigueur* Manhattan stop for those whose countrymen conceived and constructed the monument nearly a century and a half ago. One middle-aged Frenchman leading a group of school-age kids waxes enthusiastic about the statue's history and the ideals it represents. Americans have much less bureaucracy, he says, and it's amazing that a black man could become president. Like many others from his native country, he loves the idea of America, its allergy to hierarchies of class and inherited status, its optimism and ethic of freedom, and especially the freedom to create oneself.

Listening to these Gallic accents, I'm swept up in their enthusiasm. Like them, I feel the presence of something much greater than myself. I'm awed in a religious sense as I stand on the southern tip of Manhattan looking out at the great green goddess that symbolizes liberty, hospitality, and opportunity—all that's best about America itself.

No image is more widely recognized. Lady Liberty adorns everything from the logo of an insurance company to greeting cards from NARAL Pro-Choice America. But how well do we really know the

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Statue of Liberty? How familiar is its history and symbolism, its transplantation from a French sculptor's studio to the shores of New York? How many of us understand its political and cultural trajectory from French academic statuary to icon of American pop? The Statue of Liberty is, in short, a transatlantic phenomenon, a give-and-take between France and the United States, between high culture and popular taste.

Partly for this reason, it has come to symbolize America while also signifying a set of powerful values that people in Europe and elsewhere can embrace. But those values have not remained stable over the years. Ever since its first images appeared in the mid-1870s, even before construction in Paris had begun, the colossus of New York Harbor has been an open figurative screen, a massive sculpted form onto which an endless variety of ideas, values, intentions, and emotions could be projected. One of the statue's most startling qualities has been to change its apparent meaning from one decade or generation to the next and even to represent, all at once, several opposing qualities: liberty and subjection; immigration and xenophobia; the lure of America and its dangerous shoals; a future of hope and a past of despair; and, of course, Franco-American friendship and French-American distaste.

According to the art historian Albert Boime, our extremely fluid understanding of what the statue says comes from three of its essential qualities: abstractness, artistic banality, and colossal size.¹ Its creator, Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, intended the Statue of Liberty to last many decades, even centuries, and wanted it to express a general, universal theme. He also hoped that the often-dramatic changes inherent in liberal societies wouldn't render it obsolete. He thus gave it a classical form, one that had endured since ancient times, and kept it abstract and allegorical rather than having it represent a particular individual or historical event. The Statue of Liberty doesn't even overtly refer to the United States.

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True, Bartholdi inscribed the date July 4, 1776, on its tablet, but that inscription is invisible from afar and, in any case, holds meaning for people other than Americans, just like July 14, 1789, or September 11, 2001. And, of course, the meanings of all three dates are themselves highly contested both within the countries directly involved—France and the United States—and elsewhere in the world. Some see Bastille Day as representing liberation from oppression, while others see its violence as prefiguring the Reign of Terror. For virtually all Americans, 9/11 stands as a day of tragedy and unwarranted suffering and death, but some see it as an act of war authored by our political enemies while others consider it purely a crime, if a particularly heinous one. At the same time, an uncomfortable number of people see 9/11 not as a tragedy but as a victory, as the successful punishment of a country believed guilty of oppressing and exploiting the Muslim world. July 4 is less controversial, though those who dislike the United States hardly want to celebrate the nation whose creation it represents.

Like its abstractness, the Statue of Liberty's artistic banality—its conservatism of form—is related to its need to survive political and cultural change. Bartholdi himself admitted that his statue “cannot be considered as a very great work of art.”² But its neutral neoclassicism allowed it to elude passionate aesthetic attack and gave it the potential to represent a great many different things. Finally, the statue's colossal size and strategic location guaranteed that it would continue to draw attention and thus retain the ability to encourage people to confer meaning on it, whether for political, social, or commercial purposes.

One of the best ways to contemplate both the fluidity and the durability of the Statue of Liberty is to jog or walk along the Hudson River toward Battery Park. I run there often, and every time I round a minipeninsula jutting into the river I'm startled as Liberty comes

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brilliantly into view. With each step I see her from a slightly different angle, and she changes subtly but perceptibly as I move closer to her, turning west and then south. On each outing, it's as if I'm seeing her for the first time. Though I know she's been planted there in the harbor for more than a century, she seems an apparition, a Venus rising from the sea, just as Bartholdi intended when he chose Bedloe's Island for her site.

Jogging toward the Statue of Liberty is one thing, visiting it quite another. Once we're finally released from security and onto the boat, I climb to the unsheltered upper deck, where it's bitterly, unexpectedly cold. But it would be senseless to watch Liberty approach through the grimy windows below, so I resist going inside. As the ferry inches toward Liberty Island, I gradually perceive just how very big the statue is. Its foundation looks like a medieval fortress, the pedestal a monument in itself. Most surprising is Liberty's color. From a distance she looks sea green, but up close she's a delicate pastel color, the natural green of her oxidized copper. I can see the seams of the three hundred copper sheets Bartholdi hammered into wafers no wider ($3/32$ of an inch) than a delicate pastry shell.

I haven't been to the Statue of Liberty since the sixth grade. Back then we could readily climb to the top and look out her windowed crown; today, in the wake of 9/11, visitors can go inside only with a special pass, booked months in advance. The lucky few undergo a second security screening, no bags of any kind allowed. We'd learned on the boat that the statue represents, as the recording put it, "freedom, opportunity, security, and the future." Post-9/11, the security is so tight that most visitors must remain outside.

As our ferry docks, another boat comes in from New Jersey's Liberty State Park. My mind flashes on *The Sopranos'* famous credit sequence in which Tony passes by this very park. As his SUV glides down the New Jersey Turnpike, the roadway cutting a wide swath through Liberty International (Newark) Airport, the camera focuses