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EXHIBITION REVIEW

Statue of Liberty Museum: A Golden Door To an Iconic Monument

It provides a stunning overview—and view—of Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi's ambitious creation

BY EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

New York

LOOK OUT through the 22-foot-high glass walls of the final gallery of the new Statue of Liberty Museum on Liberty Island and you can see the 151-foot-high statue of Lady Liberty, her familiar torch held aloft. That torch, we learn, is actually a replacement. The original—a spectacle in itself—is mounted inside the gallery, its yellow "flame" wrapped by a woven framework of bent copper, molded and hammered by French craftsmen who worked on the statue for a decade, beginning in 1875, under the supervision of its creator, Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi (1834-1904). The original torch is imposing, but ramshackle. During the statue's 1986 centennial renovation, it was replaced with a gilded copper sheil, lighted from

A place for the statue's 4.3 million annual visitors to learn more about its inspiring history.

without—Liberty's current lamp.

In that gallery, then, you take in both the statue's origins and its current reality, the historical artifact and the resonant symbol. The effect is heightened by a full-size copper replica of Liberty's face mounted on one wall, towering over viewers, at once stern, firm, sad, compassionate and unsentimental—a gaze still cast over a city's port.

And you are reminded, too, of the nervy monumentality of the entire project. When dedicated in 1886, the 450,000-pound, 22-story-high monument was taller than any other building in New York. One of this museum's accomplishments is that it explores that monumentality without diminishing it. We begin to appreciate the statue in all its facets: as an artistic enterprise, an engineering achievement and an embodiment of an ideal—as well as a pop icon, toppled in apocalyptic films and celebrated in commercial imagery.

The $75 million, 26,000-square-foot museum accomplishes this survey simply and clearly, without excess or pomp. Designed by the architecture firm FXCollaborative with exhibitions created by ESI Design, it defers to the statue rather than competes with it; its pavilion-like structure seems to emerge from the island, topped with an elevated green roof-scape and a panoramic viewing platform.

A museum exhibition had been enclosed in the statue's pedestal base. But post-9/11 security makes it impossible for all 4.3 million annual visitors to enter the statue. Only about 20% are admitted; fewer still can climb to the crown's viewing space. A freestanding exhibition, open to all island visitors, was required.

It works. After a tribute to donors, the statue is introduced with stunning video imagery in a 10-minute "Immersive Theater." Parts go by too quickly, but displays later provide a more detailed survey of Bartholdi's ambitions and help demonstrate how this colossus was wrestled into being: Its skin is formed from 300 3/32-inch-thick copper sheets hammered into shapes over carved wooden molds and supported by an interior iron framework designed by Alexandre-Gustave Eiffel (who had yet to create his great tower).

Why though, such a statue at all? The idea, we learn, came from Édouard René Lefèbvre de Laboulaye (1811-1883), a French authority on the U.S. Constitution and an abolitionist. The end of the American Civil War inspired his notion of a French gift to America honoring shared ideals. He and Bartholdi followed in the tradition of the Marquis de Lafayette, whose support of the Revolutionary War led to a century of American statuary, including Bartholdi's 1876 example, mounted in New York's Union Square. In researching "Liberty," Bartholdi traveled across the American continent.

The result defined an aspect of American exceptionalism. In the 1870s, after the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the debacle of the 1871 Paris Commune, and a long history of French revolutionary impulses gone awry, the statue recognized a different ideal. Bartholdi rejected French revolutionary images: A starry crown is on Liberty's head, not a Phrygian cap. And while the statue alludes to history—Liberty's book is inscribed with the date of American independence—it seems to stand outside it; you have to look closely to see shattered chains at the statue's feet. It reflects an Enlightenment ideal. Its seven-pointed crown, illuminated torch and open book invoke reason, light and understanding, not utopian conquest. Bartholdi called it "a work of great moral value."

That becomes clear here, though the political interpretations on display vary widely. A final section, "Becoming Liberty," presents us with touch-screen kiosks in which we select seven aspects of liberty we find most important from 15 (Freedom, Patriotism, Rights, Democracy, Abolition, Revolution, Independence, Opportunity, Equality, Republic, Rule of Law, Reconstruction, Free Speech, Suffrage, Dissent). Snap an accompanying photo and it appears on a giant screen, before shrinking into a video mosaic of the Statue of Liberty. This is playfully alluring, but more an amusement than an advance in illumination.

I missed, too, an important theme. Bartholdi called his statue "Liberty Enlightening the World," and imagined it sending its message outward. Emma Lazarus's 1883 sonnet, "The New Colossus," which still appears on a bronze plaque in the statue's pedestal, shifts the direction—from beaming light outward to welcoming refugees inward. For some reason, Lazarus's ideal-shifting idea is hardly noticed, perhaps because the theme is taken up at Ellis Island nearby.

In any case, we reach the final gallery with a greater understanding, so that at its best (to recall Lazarus), the museum becomes a lamp illuminating the lamp lifted beside the golden door.

Mr. Rothstein is the Journal's Critic at Large.

Gallery with the Statue of Liberty's original torch and a view of the statue itself, above; an exterior view of the museum, above left; gallery with a full-scale replica of the statue's foot from the 1986 restoration, below

An exhibit exploring the Paris workshop where Bartholdi directed craftsmen to transform his design models into the final statue, above left; view from the roof of the museum, above right

DAVID SUNDBERG/ESTO (TOP 2, BOTTOM LEFT); KEENA (PHOTO 2)