

Critical Opinion on the Columbus Monument in Syracuse, New York from comments delivered at a gathering at the Monument on August 27, 2017

by Mary Whittington (BA Anthropology, UC Santa Barbara)

There is a Columbus Monument in downtown Syracuse whose architectural forms and sculptural elements carry a heavy symbolic load. Two, in fact- first, the messages intended by its Italian sculptor and American architect and admired by the public when it was unveiled in 1934, and a second set of unintended but powerful truths.

First we must acknowledge the disembodied Native American heads at Columbus' feet. We are meant to understand these "masks" at the upper corners of his obelisk pedestal as tributes to native people in the Americas. But how can they honor a people when they have no traces of personhood or culture beyond blankly staring faces in fanciful headdress?

Worse still, the grim history of anthropology and its collector's mania where Native Americans are concerned raises another possibility: that these blank faces are not symbolic conquered cultures but the imagined faces of the dead. Throughout the 19th century plaster casts made from dead and captive living Native Americans were a coveted commodity in museums and anthropological collections. The contours of the head were believed to be proof positive of racial types which could be ranked by level of development and used to justify the pseudo-sciences of phrenology and social Darwinism¹. In this context these grisly faces on the monument are simultaneously trophies, attempts to subjugate, and symbols of dominion.

The obelisk on which they sit is an Egyptian architectural form, pharaonically ancient. There is a long history of European appropriation of this form (including outright theft of ancient artifacts) to be displayed in European piazzas and public spaces, and incorporated into European monuments². While a dramatic choice for elevating a sculpture, it also has connotations of phallic power and military might that are often used to reinforce the authority of the subject. However, the impressiveness is always second hand, a kind of artistic stolen valor from Africa's great catalog of innovations.

Four triremes protrude from the base of the obelisk. These ships, characterized by a triple row of oars on each side, are an innovation in ship design that was in evidence across the ancient Mediterranean. Believed to have originated in Phoenicia (modern Lebanon) in the 6th century BCE, the design quickly spread to Greece and beyond. Although the trireme does not belong exclusively to any cultural area or civilization, in the Columbus Monument it is meant to represent *Roman* (and by extension Italian) nautical prowess. The ship is the symbol of cultural supremacy and the literal vessel of colonial imperialism. From another perspective, though, it

¹Fear-Segal, J; (2013) Plaster-cast Indians at the National Museum. In: Fear-Segal, J and Tillet, R, (ed.) **Indigenous Bodies: reviewing, relocating, reclaiming.** (pp. 33-52). SUNY Press: Albany.

²Hassan, FA; (2003) Imperialist Appropriations of Egyptian Obelisks. In: Jeffreys, D, (ed.) **Views of Ancient Egypt since Napoleon Bonaparte: imperialism, colonialism and modern appropriations.** (pp. 19-68). UCL Press: London.

can be seen as an example of the multicultural nature of the Mediterranean (in all times) where ideas and innovations move between peoples and across borders.

The unveiling on October 12, 1934 was a frenzy of pageantry and celebration according to contemporary accounts, with a street parade a mile long. Italian-Americans had raised almost \$20,000 at the outset of the Depression to celebrate what they saw as a shining figure in Italian history. The post-1875 political fracture and social upheaval that drove many of them and their families out of Italy was forgotten in the glory of Columbus' achievement. Targeted by anti-Italian and anti-Catholic sentiment, immigration restrictions, and mass lynchings³ through the 19th century into the 1920s during the second rise of the KKK, Italian-Americans were bolstered by their campaigns to erect Columbus monuments and establish a national Columbus Day. While we can be sympathetic to the Italian immigrants' struggles for acceptance and fair treatment, we can also see how, in the Syracuse Columbus Monument, this goal led to cultural appropriation being used to reinforce a false narrative of supremacy. We can also see the underlying truth that all cultures exist in an atmosphere of exchange and mutual influence. Today, many in the American South and elsewhere in the country who also feel angry, powerless, or threatened are rallying around monuments that represent the past in a way that is no less glorious to them for being fictional. Among the many parallels between our times and the racial upheaval of the 1920s and 1930s, we also see a return to white nationalist rhetoric in public discourse⁴.

For that reason it has become even more imperative that we recognize the intentions, prejudices, and inadvertent truths embedded in these public spaces. That we strive to understand the emotional investment that some communities have in them, but also the damage that they do to historical truth and social justice.

We should be relieved to see this monument go, yielding its place of honor to something more worthy of tribute in the history of our city and region, most especially the Onondaga Nation. But until that time comes, let us subvert the narrative of cultural supremacy on display in Columbus Square.

³Gauthreaux, Alan; (2007) "An Inhospitable Land: Anti-Italian Sentiment and Violence in Louisiana, 1891-1924". University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations. 515. <http://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/515>

⁴<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/12/the-return-of-the-1920s/422163/>