

The Statue of Liberty and its ties to the Middle East

The fragmentary nature of Danh Vo's "We The People" echoes the often shattered sculpture that archaeologists recover and attempt to reconstruct. Pieces of a single ancient statue may be dispersed across different museums, just as Vo's work is being shown at venues all over the world. Its placement at the Oriental Institute also serves as a reminder of the power of imperial monumental art from the distant past to the modern era.

Now an iconic American monument, the Statue of Liberty has interesting connections to the ancient world and the modern history of the Middle East. Its sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi visited Egypt in 1855 and expressed his admiration for the colossal statues on the facade of the temple at Abu Simbel. He resolved to work on a monumental scale, and in 1867, Bartholdi proposed that the Egyptian government build a giant statue and light beacon in the form of a woman holding a torch aloft to be erected at the entrance of the Suez Canal. Entitled "Egypt (or Progress) Carrying the Light to Asia," it was to symbolize industrial and social progress in Egypt. The Suez statue was never built, and the project was later reconfigured as a gift from France to the United States to celebrate the centennial of American independence (dedicated in New York, 1886).

In its final form, Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty hearkens back strongly to reconstructions of the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the original Seven Wonders of the Ancient World (see over).

Left: Modern reconstruction of the Colossus of Rhodes (built 292 - 280 BC).

Right: "Egypt (or Progress) Carrying the Light to Asia," by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi. This early version of the Statue of Liberty was never built.

Images: Courtesy of Saudi Aramco World Magazine.



The Statue of Liberty and its Ties to the Ancient World

Towering over the entrance to New York harbor, Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi's Statue of Liberty is generally acknowledged to evoke both the symbolism and harbor-side placement of the ancient Colossus of Rhodes. Created by Chares of Lindos between 292 to 280 BC, that Hellenistic image of the Greek solar deity Helios rose more than 107 feet high and faced ships entering the harbor of Rhodes. Further, both the ancient and modern statues were monuments dedicated to independence and liberty. The dedication text of the colossus survives in anthologies of Greek poetry:

To you, o Sun, the people of Dorian Rhodes set up this bronze statue reaching to Olympus, when they had pacified the waves of war and crowned their city with the spoils taken from the enemy. Not only over the seas but also on land did they kindle the lovely torch of freedom and independence. For to the descendants of Herakles belongs dominion over sea and land.

Less well-known, however, is the direct ancient Egyptian connection between the colossus and the New York statue. The independence that Rhodes celebrated with the erection of the colossus had been gained only by the critical intervention in 304 BC of ships belonging to Ptolemy I, a former general of Alexander the Great and founder of the Egyptian dynasty that would last until the death of Cleopatra (VII) the Great. Ptolemy's forces dispersed the siege of Rhodes begun in 305 BC by armies loyal to Antigonos I, a rival, former general of Alexander. Following the withdrawal of the enemy troops, Rhodes seized and sold their abandoned weapons and thus financed the harbor monument.

Although it is the torch of liberty that is highlighted in both Greek and English dedication texts, the numerous green foam crowns sold to New York tourists indicate clearly that the most iconic aspect of the Statue of Liberty is her crown of solar rays, a feature typically restored in images of the lost colossus as well. Here again there is a direct Egyptian connection, as Ptolemaic kings represented themselves as Helios on earth. In antiquity, the crown given to Liberty in New York was worn more prominently by Ptolemy III on his official coinage. Bartholdi's statue has been intended originally for Port Said beside the Suez Canal (see over). The placement in Egypt would have been quite logical.



Gold coin featuring Ptolemy III as Helios. British Museum, London. (image source: Wikimedia commons)