

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
March 13, 2025
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At the corner of 59th and 5th in Manhattan, at the very southeastern corner of central park is a Grand Army Plaza.¹ In the plaza there is a fountain and a statue. A road cuts across the 1/2 acre and in many ways demonstrates the dual intent of the space. The fountain was the gift of the Pulitzer family. There are six basins, or bowls of water, becoming smaller as they rise. Atop the fountain is the Roman goddess Pomona who carries a basket of fruit. In this the plaza has a space to honor, to reflect, to enjoy "abundance." This was completed in 1916.

In the second half of the plaza is the Sherman Monument. General Tecumseh Sherman is riding his horse "Ontario" being led by victory, the winged goddess Nike. Nike holds a large palm frond. This statue was commissioned by "friends of Sherman" and the city council. The statue is gilded and is the creation of Augustus Saint-Gaudens. The equestrian statue, the largest gilded statue in the United States, was completed in 1903.

The Grand Army Plaza was completed in its final form with the addition of the fountain 1916 and the relocating of the Sherman statue so to create symmetry in the space as well as entry into Central Park. The final design of the plaza was inspired by the Place de la Concorde in Paris.



¹ There is another Grand Army Plaza in New York City in Brooklyn at the Northern entry to Prospect Park.

Although the Pulitzer Fountain has garnered attention for its tendency to leak and be overrun by rats, the statue of Saint-Gaudens has endured in its importance as a moment in American art, specifically sculpture, as well as an expression of union victory in the decades of monument construction beginning in the 1870s.

It would be easy to place the Sherman Monument in the vast array of equestrian statues that were commissioned to either preserve the culture of the "lost cause" or to proclaim the purpose of the Civil War as a "fight for the union." The Sherman Monument reflects the turning away from any relation to slavery or the common woe of misfortune of which Lincoln opined. In many ways it is consistent with both the Union and the Confederate monuments that emerged and would continue to be commissioned into the 1920s. Sherman is riding to victory, he fought and persevered the union. In cities like Charlottesville and Richmond, similar statues of generals riding horses would also convey victory. Although the fight to preserve slavery was lost, the fight to preserve the southern culture was not lost. Hence a statue of Robert E. Lee could be commissioned as one who was victorious.

As the statues and the "monument mania" of the time of Jim Crow now can be seen as conveying very problematic messages some are coming down. Richmond has removed its Monument Row. Silent Sam in Chapel Hill has been toppled. And more will likely follow. Arguably, Sherman's statue celebrating his "march to the sea" is just as problematic as the silence such statuary maintained regarding emancipation and the profound moral failure of slavery. Saint-Gaudens was commissioned to create a statue replete with a divine guide of victory. If not God, at least the gods were on the side of the Union.

I have made a habit of late to visit Sherman when I am in the city. There is something about the statue that does not fall to the easy definition of the commission. Three things have changed how I look at it. The first is how Saint-Gaudens sat with Sherman 18 times, two hours each time, to sketch, to listen, to find the person so wrapped in legend. The next is the expression captured by Saint-Gaudens. Sherman is beyond weary, empty, as if victory had no glory. This makes the gilding of the statue something of a balance, or even quiet critique. The true victory was wealth not goodness.

Lastly, I took interest in the development of Saint-Gaudens' career. The Sherman Monument is his last great commission, his final monumental project. He would die shortly after it was complete. And Saint-Gaudens knew this as he had been suffering with cancer for some time. Moreover when Sherman and Saint-Gaudens met in the late 1880s, Sherman was near death. It is as if the figure of Nike is taking Sherman beyond the earth, leading him unto Valhalla or Elysium. It was as if the fight was over.

Very, very few people would be able to identify the work of Augustus Louis Saint-Gaudens. Considered the greatest sculptor America has seen, his is unknown today. Almost the opposite is true of Sherman. Everything from the "Sherman Tank" to "Sherman's March" have kept his memory alive. Yet for me the true power of the monument in Manhattan's Grand Army Plaza is how much it conveys the life and work of Saint-Gaudens. His great skill in being able to fashion

in relief the quality of the soul, the nature of life's grandeur and at the same time simplicity. How strength of character is often found in humbleness, even in someone as fierce as Sherman.

If you follow the arc of Saint-Gaudens great public works, from his Admiral Farragut, to Lincoln standing, to Ward leading black soldiers, they all embody this theme of courage and humility, strength without arrogance. In this way the Sherman statue becomes the final act in a play, the last aria in a grand opera. The Civil War, which connects all the statues, is not lost. The terrible conflict does not become a metaphor of a symbol. The tragedy, the trauma, the insanity is not far off in each monument. Yet, also in each is something heroic, something transcendent. Sherman is riding a gilded horse being led by a goddess. And then, at the same time, he is yet a man born in Ohio who saw terrible things and died with friends who sought to honor him.





