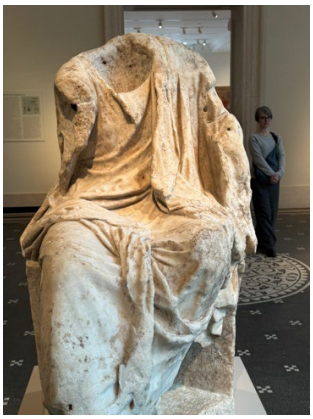
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
Wednesday, March 19, 2025
Rev Fred Garry

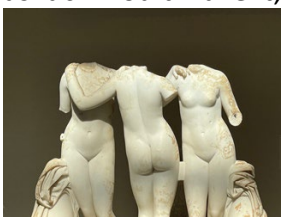



Visiting the Metropolitan Museum in Manhattan there is a surprising feature in the Greco-Roman wing. A lot of heads. It seemed odd at first. Why are there so many heads? Yet, the more I visited, the more it was a matter of course. And then, upon closer examination, I recognized a similar feature. The heads were sculpted separately from the torso; they were interchangeable; they were not carved as part of the statue itself.

Looking further in the collection, I noticed that many of the marble statues lacked heads. There were more heads than bodies. From this I came to the conclusion that a monumental statue could be changed, repurposed as it were. With the transition of power or honor the base or body of the statue could remain the same while the image of the person honored could change. The governor or the spouse of a leader could be depicted, as surely all the emperors of Rome were, in a grand, god-like style. But then there is a new governor or a new spouse or a new emperor. By sculpting the heads separately, all one need do was swap out the head and "voila" you have a new monument to honor the new leader.

Perhaps it is because America has only been in the monument business for 150 years, but this sort of economy of honor, where the value can be reappraised, is not something we have discovered. When we cast a monument, there is little chance the image of a particular person can be replaced with another. Our statues are very particular. A notable exception is the head of victory on the Sherman statue. The cast of her head is on display in the American Wing of the Metropolitan and there is, at least the possibility, that if we wanted to reimagine the face of victory a new head could be cast.


The particularity of the images comprising American statuary art is a helpful light when we seek to understand the price of memory, especially the value we seek when we hope to offer honor. Honor can be ideal, or general, or symbolic. The Three Graces is a great example of this. And as luck would have it, the example of this statue in the Metropolitan is without heads.



The Three Graces *depicts the three daughters of Zeus, each of whom is described as being able to bestow a particular gift on humanity: (from left to right) Euphrosyne (mirth), Aglaia (elegance) and Thalia (youth and beauty).*[1] Hence Euphrosyne, Aglaia, and Thalia are specific as goddesses, but non-specific in the image or person who embodies them. Many artists have sought to reproduce this classic statue. If we consider the example at the Metropolitan, we can see two things. First the ideal of grace manifest in three unique forms would have been placed someone, somewhere, with a particular interest. This is not a commercialized piece of yard art. Where this ancient statue was meant to reside, the benefactor, and perhaps the sculptor, would have created a place of contemplation, but they also could have created a moment of honor.

The possibility of honor was in the heads of the three which is the second factor. Imagine for a moment if your image was meant to convey "youth and beauty" or if there was someone of great refinement who was chosen to be the image of Aglaia, and the same with mirth. This particular honor could be greeted with acclaim or with critique, but the choice is obvious. If we look back at the Sherman statue, perhaps the "honor" will be clearer.

The model for victory used by Augustus Saint-Gaudens was known to him, but she was also African-American. "The principal model for Victory was Hettie Anderson, an African American woman who was a favored artists' model in New York during the 1890s."[2] Was the selection of Hettie Anderson a subtle reference to emancipation? Most likely and in the community of artists it was more likely a not-so-subtle reference.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Three_Graces
[2] https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/12019

When we consider honorary statues where the object of monument is a particular person, the flexibility changes. The Sherman statue exemplifies this. It is possible, although, neither likely nor needed, but it is possible to replace the image of Hettie Anderson. It would be impossible to do the same with Sherman. Where this becomes important is the value or cost of memory.

What is owed to Sherman as a general, as a victor in battle, may experience re-valuation when it is seen in light of "Sherman's March" as it is interpreted today. More to the point was Sherman's role in the near extinction of the American Plains Bison. After the Civil War Sherman continued in his military service and orchestrated the slaughter of the buffalo herds to thwart the nomadic life of Native American tribes of the plains. Without the buffalo, tribes whose lives were based on following them had no reason to be nomadic. In this way they became rooted in reservations. Do such actions revalue the need to honor Sherman?

Moreover as the question of slavery and emancipation and Jim Crow begin to redefine the historical narrative of the Civil War, does the "cause of union" and the "victory of union" which the Sherman statue embodies, do these continue to evoke the demand of honor? Is this a debt we still owe?

Sherman, like many other statues where the monument seeks to honor a particular individual, also suffers from what Kierkegaard called the "scandal of the particular." Seeking to understand the offence of faith, Kierkegaard argued that Jesus of Galilee must ever be stumbling block of honor. How can a Galilean peasant, and even more how can this one Galilean peasant be God in our midst? Although not on the same level of honor, a key factor of all monumental statuary seeking to honor an individual risks such a stumbling block. Does Sherman yet embody a victory we honor?

A part of this might be diffused if we remember the removable heads. Could our image of victory or even a particular victory be cast in such a way that it is less vulnerable to devaluation? I am unconvinced that such a risk is avoidable, nor solved by making statuary only general or symbolic. The important question is not, how do we avoid offence, but what is the intended value, and does it satisfy a debt? What is more, how long does a statue's particular honor need to be protected? It is a question we need to answer as we venture into latter half of two centuries of monuments.