

IVAN SCHWARTZ, StudioEIS

Jan 29, 2020 – Douglass and Tubman Sculpture Dedication

(February 10, 2020)

My mother had a crook toe and loved afternoon naps, my father had a rusty spine, a full head of hair and a fear of authority. For the longest time I thought I had all of their hand-me-downs including a certain measure of excellence in all things.

At the age of 16 in an effort to prove my worthiness, I set out for the Metropolitan museum where I found the perfect painting to make a perfect copy of. I spent months diligently copying & painting and It was very well received! When my mother died, we de-accessioned the painting from the spot where it had been hanging for 44 years.

I always knew what I wanted to do, but our final destinations don't usually synch-up with our 16-year-old visions. My father was a working man who, for some unknown reason, thought the idea that his sons would become artists was just fine.

When I left art school my famous teacher pushed me out the door into the cold hard world. "Ivan," he said, "if you hang around long enough someone's bound to take you seriously."

And that moment Mom and Dad has finally arrived. I discovered long ago that *I'd been called*, much as many of you had been when you dedicated yourselves to public service. In my case I owe a debt to the profound influence of one of my teachers, who at a very early age fanned the flames of an already smoldering sense of purpose.

In helping to put a face to our American History (Oh and did I say it's now getting on to 50 years for me) I discovered that some of America's sculpted symbols have finally begun to give way to representation that more accurately reflects the character of our nation today.

Consider if you will Abraham Lincoln at the time of his death, then known as Father Abraham. He became the Great Emancipator as a sculpted symbol, & finally most agree Lincoln's legacy will forever be the Savior of the Union. All useful titles for the construction of sculpted symbols for a time and for a people who had experienced the greatest of all our nations conflagrations. All of these representations were realized in sculpture beginning immediately after his death in 1865. By the way the first major sculpture of Lincoln was made by a woman – Lavinia Ream.

But if you think the images of Lincoln are that of a real man (and there are more Lincoln sculptures in America than of any other President by far) think again. Some part of the job of artists at that time, whether they knew it or not, was to create important symbols of the man who many Americans still regard as our most important President.

The same was true of artists when it came to the representation of Washington & Jefferson and other members of the founding generation as symbols who upheld the principles & purpose of that generation - to free Americans from Monarchic tyranny. This has also been true of almost every generation until artists got a poke in the eye with a burnt stick when, with the advent of abstraction around 1913, we starting representing mythic ideas and heroic men with abstract symbols.

But much of what we see in our public squares can still safely be regarded as mythic and also belonging to our popular memory – that is *what we'd like things to look like rather than what they really do look like* and of course this applies to history as well.

In my time I've been asked to make James Madison taller and give Tiger Woods eyes that are more like his mothers. I have *also* witnessed the removal of the Black waiting room at the Santa-Fe Rail station in Galveston Texas, which became the Center for Transportation and Commerce in 1981. The stewards of that institution could then claim *that it was never there* when the museum opened nearly 40 years ago. Not a well-kept secret however the original sin of segregation was under the magnifier once again, much to the museum's horror.

And so, what I have tried to do in this very well-trodden path of literal sculpture-making, is... dispel myths by creating the most naturalistic representations possible. In the 19th century our sculpted heroes had to be larger than life men, literally. As it happens, Washington & Jefferson and were quite ordinary in stature – aside from their extraordinary height. I know because I've had the pleasure of measuring their clothing. Washington was typically middle aged – had a belly and spindly legs and Jefferson was tall like a bean pole - a very rangy guy.

In the 20th century we predominately added white men to our public pedestals who had a hand in consolidating the continent, built the railroads and gave us industry that would eventually make America the largest economy in the world.

My approach with the benefit of a great deal more useful historical background material has been: (and what other course was left to me) Make it without an attitude and always ask my subjects a few questions before we begin. During those days in 1785 that Jean Antoine

Houdon spent with Washington at Mount Vernon, before beginning his most important commission in America for the Virginia Capital, he must have gleaned some measure of the man who would soon become our first President. Taking a note from the Frenchman I have imagined many conversations with Lincoln and Washington and lately with Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass – *They have spent time with me in my imagination.* (slowly)

We've used this art form to celebrate, elevate and on occasion denigrate our subjects. Aside from sometimes wanting things to be very beautiful, I want to represent the great & powerful, the ordinary working man and woman - Presidents and scoundrels just as they are or were at the moment they lived and I always begin by asking them "How would *you* like to be depicted? - *I dare to take leave of my senses and wonder what would it have been like to be in a quiet room with Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman to discuss what we were about to do. I could be wrong but I think Mr. Douglass would have taken satisfaction with what was about to ensue – he knew the importance and power of his own image, whereas somehow, I doubt Harriet Tubman would have seen the purpose.*

I still make sculptures of the likes of Washington and Lincoln, I'm not turning my back on those gentlemen, but their gentlemen's club - which has occupied our national living room – our public spaces, has, at long last, now finally begun to admit Women, African Americans and Native Americans. This doesn't change the past, but it does begin to open up a room with a different view. Not all Americans like this but it's happening nonetheless.

Ironically, it's just possible that we owe a strange debt to the Confederacy in all of this. For it was through their manic efforts to somehow transform defeat into something heroic,

after the Civil War that Confederate monuments proliferated. For a long time, but more intensely in the last decade, we have debated the legitimacy of those symbols. Now often relegated to the wrong side of history, they have been taken down or moved into bondage within the confines of a museum setting - And *we* have begun filling that void, redressing centuries of omission by creating these new works like those of Douglass and Tubman. Just the other day we unveiled the largest monument in the United States dedicated to the achievement of women in the former capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia.

Our American symbols are changing. And it will be a great day when we see Harriet on the \$20.00 bill and gaining ever greater commerce for her heroic image across the entire nation. In a dynamic culture such as ours symbols and images evolve but they also devolve, which is why I sometimes call them Statues of Limitation. And while this moment may not be unique to the state of Maryland, it is a bold act of civic engagement that we applaud today in addition to celebrating the lives of these two extraordinary Americans.

It has been my honor to work on this project with all the people in the Maryland State Government, the Department of General Services, the Maryland State Archives and last but not least the 20 or 25 people in my studio and the largest Art Foundry in the US, who collaborated closely over the past year to make this happen.

Thank you.

Ivan Schwartz Jan 23- 2020

1,456 words – 4-5 minutes