



*An Appreciation of*  
Thomas Crawford's  
**STATUE OF  
FREEDOM**

*A Statue Called America,  
Pocahontas, Liberty,  
and Freedom*

*By Katya Miller*

*Fig. 1. Thomas Crawford's Statue of Freedom atop the dome of the United States Capitol combines Native American and European American symbolism, representing the aspirations of both cultures.*

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THE 144-YEAR-OLD JEWEL ATOP the United States Capitol dome has gone largely unnoticed by the masses of Americans it was meant to inspire. Look up to her! Do you see only a dome or can you see a woman in bronze standing there from another time and place? From a distance, the Statue of Freedom is often mistaken for Pocahontas, an Indian chief, or a Greek or Roman goddess. From her ambiguous and historical past, she wears an eagle-feathered headdress and clothing that appears to be Greek or Roman and holds instruments of war, with an overall effect integrating European and Native American imagery (fig. 1).

She was fashioned more than 250 years after Pocahontas inspired hope for peaceful relations between the European colonists and the original peoples of America. Native Americans and Europeans came together to create America's unique identity in times of both friendship and war. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the image of America was a native woman wearing a skirt of tobacco and a headdress of tall feathers (fig. 2). In the nineteenth century, iconic representations of America combined Native American and European American elements. Constantino Brumidi, for example, represented America as a blended Native American and European American female figure in his United States Capitol frescoes *America* (c. 1856) and *Columbus and the Indian Maiden* (fig. 3, c. 1875).

In 1855, Jefferson Davis, secretary of war, and Montgomery Meigs, Capitol engineer, considered a version of Liberty or Minerva (the Roman goddess emblematic of strength and civic virtue) to top the Capitol dome. Thomas U. Walter, the architect of the Capitol dome, had included a statue of Liberty in his first design, dated December 16, 1854. By focusing on the ideal of representing American liberty, these three men built upon a unique cultural heritage that included European and Native American symbolism. Meigs commissioned Thomas Crawford, an American sculptor living in Rome, to design and execute the most important but least noticed 19½-foot bronze symbol integrating these cultures. She weighs 15,000 pounds, and her crest rises 288 feet above the eastern plaza of the Capitol.

## *The Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries: First Lady of America*

IDEAS OF FREEDOM AND MODERN DEMOCRATIC ideals were reawakened in Europeans between 1492 and 1776 from the time of first contact with Native Americans. The Indian Nations east of the Mississippi River were matrilineal societies in which the clan mothers possessed political power and cultural freedom. In succeeding generations, their story was used by romantics, dramatists, poets, and artists to portray early American history. The colonial settlers living in areas surrounding these coastal woodland Indians exchanged ideas and resources. The symbols of the Iroquois and the Algonquian peoples were adapted into the European settler's culture. Historians prior to the late twentieth century were mostly interested in business transactions, war, and diplomatic relations—largely the lives of Indian men in their public and formal role as chiefs, warriors, medicine men, and diplomats. The historical importance of Indian women was easily misunderstood because it was not written down prior to the mid-eighteenth century. But the roles of Native American women as traders, farmers, artisans, and healers were as important in the determination and survival of their people as the roles of men.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in the sixteenth century, images of American Indian men and women wearing a feathered headdress were familiar throughout Europe, especially on cur-

*“This Statue of Freedom evolved over a long history from the societies which existed on the land we call America, through the Revolutionary War, and the time of its making, pre-Civil War and beyond that. It is a beautiful representation for us to ponder and honor with wonder.”*

~Native American historian  
Donald Grinde





**Fig. 2. The origin of the use of the image of a native woman to represent America dates back to the early sixteenth century. Pamphlets and illustrations of the people and the land, such as this 1505 German woodcut, were meant to attract newcomers to venture across the ocean to settle where native inhabitants wore feathered head-dresses and shared the bounty of the land.**

rency, and had come to be the symbol of the Western Hemisphere.<sup>2</sup> Europeans first associated the Americas with depictions of a dark-skinned, full-bodied woman wearing a feathered headdress and a skirt of tobacco leaves. Over the years the image became somewhat more lithe and lighter in complexion. Around the beginning of the nineteenth century the image of America transformed from a stylized Indian woman to a Roman or Greek goddess in features as well as dress. “The American Indian was alternately idealized and reviled at various moments in history by historians, novelists, and artists,” reflecting the prevailing psychological and political attitudes over a period of about three centuries.<sup>3</sup>

“Until the 1750s, the word America was used exclusively when referring to American Indians” who symbolized the qualities of life and liberty.<sup>4</sup> To make a revolution, the colonists first had to recognize themselves as Americans, since their identities were still steeped in European culture. This change began around the middle of the eighteenth century “when the English colonists began calling themselves, and became known in Europe as, ‘Americans.’ When the patriots used this word at that time, it emphasized their separation from England and the emerging American identity and voice for life and liberty in their new land.”<sup>5</sup>

The image of the Indian as an image of liberty was ever present in the formation of a new American identity. For example, the 1776 etching (fig. 5) of “Female Combatants” pits “Britannia” against “America”, a native woman. The image dramatizes the European response to colonial ambitions toward freedom; Britannia says, “I’ll force you to obedience, you rebellious slut,” and America in her Indian head-dress replies, “Liberty, Liberty for ever Mother, while I exist.”<sup>6</sup> In revolutionary



**Fig. 3. Columbus lifts the veil of an Indian maiden, symbolizing the European discovery of America, in Constantino Brunidi's mid-1870s mural in the Senate wing of the Capitol.**

songs, slogans, and engravings in cities along the Atlantic seaboard, Paul Revere and other artists helped to forge America's sense of identity by depicting America's first national symbol as an American Indian woman, long before the image of Uncle Sam took hold in the mid-1850s. This Indian princess image became fused with the allegorical European figure of Liberty or Minerva to create a new composite personification given various titles but expressive of the new American liberty through representative government.<sup>7</sup>

The impact of the Algonquian-speaking woman, Pocahontas, is seen in the painting commissioned for the Capitol rotunda, depicting an event that took place more than two hundred years earlier. By converting to Christianity and marrying the Englishman John Rolfe, Pocahontas became "one of America's first known women of mixed-culture."<sup>8</sup> Virginia artist John Gadsby Chapman, in his *Baptism of Pocahontas* (fig.4), portrayed her at the moment of transition "when the princess became Rebecca, and symbolically abandoned her native culture in favor of that offered by the English."<sup>9</sup> Pocahontas's brother, Nantequaus, a shadowed figure, proud of his own cultural heritage, looks away from his sister's religious conversion and life path.

In 1616, Pocahontas visited England along with other Algonquian Indians. Marrying Englishman John Rolfe and having a child "sealed diplomatic ties between the two peoples."<sup>10</sup> According to early American history, Indians such as Pocahontas acted as protector and hostess, ensuring that the Europeans who came to Jamestown and Plymouth Rock survived and successfully settled in North America. Historians say that this compassionate role would come to occupy an impor-





*Fig. 4. John G. Chapman's 12-foot by 18-foot painting, **The Baptism of Pocahontas**, was installed in the Capitol rotunda in November 1840. Note the figure of her brother, Nantequas, clothed in robes and bearing an eagle headdress as he turns his face from the ceremony. Thomas Crawford would later adapt the eagle headdress for the Statue of Freedom.*

tant place in American cultural history, especially because of its roots in the founding of the Virginia colony and the planting, harvesting, and curing of tobacco for its financial success.<sup>11</sup>

Pocahontas has been called “The First Lady of America,” “The Mother of Us All,” and “The Great Earth Mother of the Americas.”<sup>12</sup> The Statue of Freedom atop the Capitol dome perhaps still reminds visitors of Pocahontas because of the public’s perception of her as a nurturing princess, an elevated native woman’s image for others to look up to.

### *The Nineteenth Century: Liberty Removes Her Cap*

AMERICAN SCULPTOR THOMAS CRAWFORD (1813-1857), working in Rome, was asked by Capitol engineer Montgomery Meigs in August 1853 to design a sculptural group for the pediment above the east front entrance of the new Senate wing. “I do



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**Fig. 5. America, in the form of an Indian maiden, resists the imposition of British authority in this 1776 etching, “The Female Combatants.”**

not see why,” Meigs claimed, “a Republic so much richer than the Athenian should not rival the Parthenon in the front of its first public edifice.”<sup>13</sup> The central figure Crawford planned for the sculptural group “Progress of Civilization” was a personification of America flanked by a rising sun and an eagle. Crawford represented America wearing a liberty cap. Even though Secretary of War Davis objected because Americans, at least the white males, had never been enslaved, Crawford retained the liberty cap in the final design of the Senate pediment (fig. 6).

The liberty cap evolved from “[t]he Phrygian cap (later called the liberty cap) [which] originated in 750 B.C., when, as liberated slaves, the people of Troy and the Phrygians of Asia Minor wore the Roman pileus, a felt cap, as a symbol of personal liberty and national independence.”<sup>14</sup> During the Roman Empire, the soft, red conical cap with the front pulled forward was worn by emancipated former slaves. It was used in the iconography of the American Revolution as a symbol of freedom from English tyranny, often by placing the cap symbolically atop a Liberty pole or tree, as well as in the revolutionary iconography of France around the





**Fig. 6. Thomas Crawford represented America as a woman wearing a liberty cap in a figure in his sculptural group, *Progress of Civilization*, for the Senate pediment. The statues were modeled in 1854, carved at the Capitol in 1855-59, and installed in 1863.**

1790s. This association was well established when Crawford was commissioned to design a statue for the top of the Capitol dome. In fact, Walter's first design for the Capitol dome showed Liberty bearing a liberty cap atop a pole.

Meigs wrote to Crawford on May 11, 1855, about a commission for the statue to crown the dome: "We have too many Washington's: we have America on the pediment, Victories and Liberties are rather pagan emblems, but a Liberty I fear is the best we can get."<sup>15</sup> The figure was to be larger than lifesize and would be modeled with great boldness and spirit considering the height it would be placed upon, and she would have agreeable contours for all views. The identifying features for such an important statue for this fledgling country were crucial in finding America's identity, since this Capitol was to challenge the grand buildings of Europe.

Crawford modeled three designs for the statue. The first design (fig. 7) showed an armed personification of peace and victory, holding an olive branch (the Athenian symbol of peace) in her left hand. In her right hand was a sword and shield of the United States, with a laurel wreath crowning her head, representing her as



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“Freedom triumphant-- in Peace and War.”<sup>16</sup> He introduced a base surrounded by wreaths indicating the rewards Freedom was ready to bestow upon distinction in the arts and sciences. For the second design (fig. 8), Crawford stated that the statue symbolized “Armed Liberty” in an imperialistic stance in the guise of a flowing draped woman with a wreath of victory and a shield of the country in her left hand. In her right hand a sheathed sword showed that the fight was over for the present but that force was ready for use whenever required. For the base, Crawford introduced a globe, which was to show the geographical location of the statue and “her protection of the America[n] world.”<sup>17</sup> Capitol historian William C. Allen has explained the most important new element in the second design: “Perhaps forgetting Davis’ earlier objections, he also changed her headgear to a liberty cap. The sculptor’s stay in Rome undoubtedly isolated him from the domestic passions that were stirred up by the mere mention of slavery, freedmen, or emancipation.”<sup>18</sup>

Secretary of War Davis, a Mississippi slaveholder and ardent proslavery advocate, suggested Crawford replace the liberty cap with a helmet “to signify America’s

*Fig. 7. Crawford’s first design, which he wrote depicted “Freedom triumphant—in Peace and War,” wore a wreath and carried an olive branch in her left arm with her right hand resting on a sword.*

*Fig. 8. Crawford’s second design included the liberty cap, which Secretary of War Jefferson Davis suggested be replaced by something more appropriate to American history.*



**Fig. 9.** Jefferson Davis, West Point class of 1828, produced this drawing of Minerva as a drawing class exercise. For the Statue of Freedom, Crawford adopted the helmet but replaced the feathers with an eagle's head and feathers.

**Fig. 10.** The Statue of Freedom became a symbol of the Union during the Civil War, as seen in this hand colored frontispiece for the 1861 volume of Harper's Weekly.

victory over tyranny, her cause triumphant.”<sup>19</sup> Davis argued that an acceptable symbol of liberty should be more American in its motif and should not be associated with radical symbols of the French Revolution or Roman emancipation.

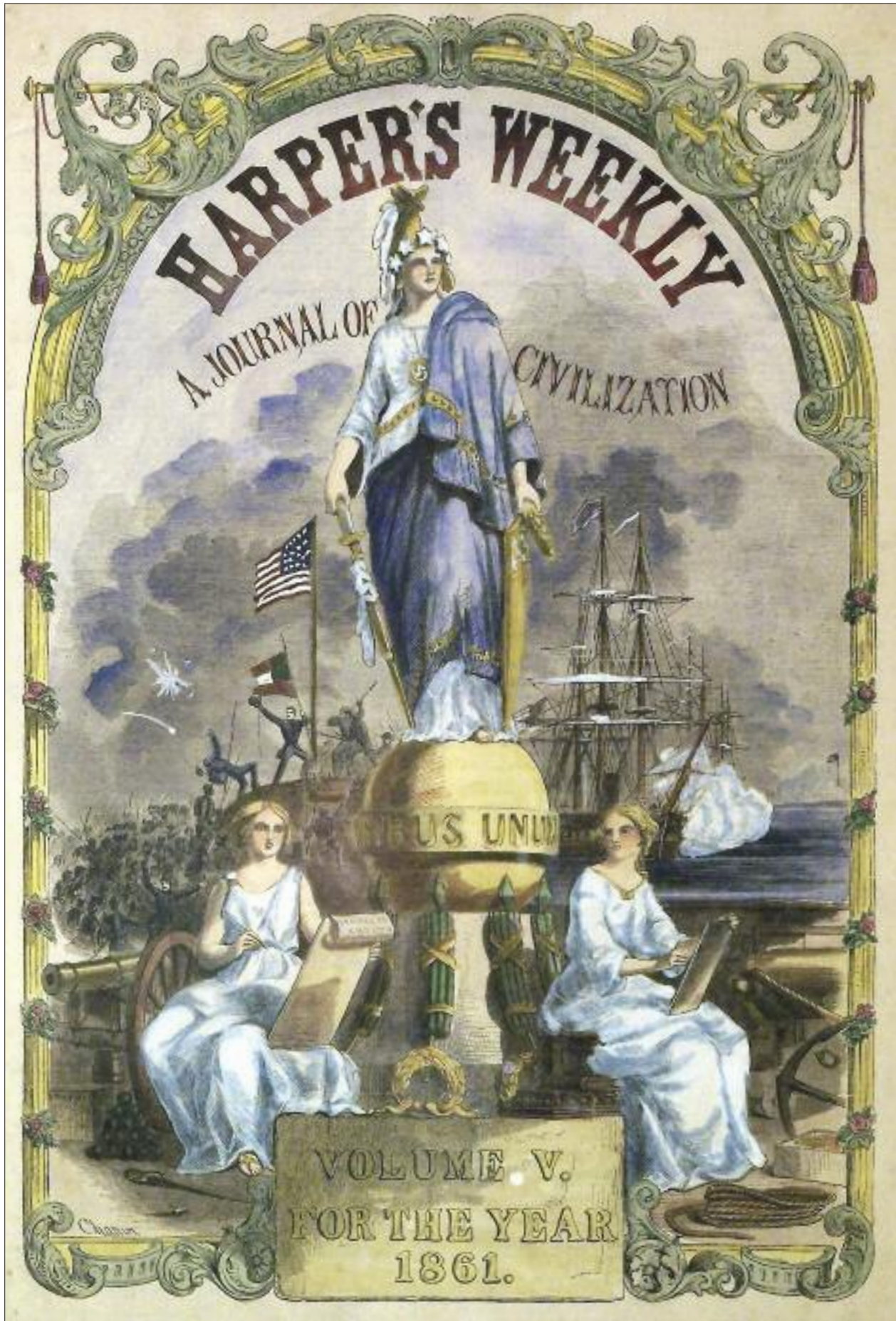
Davis, a Mexican War veteran, knew exactly what he wanted: a vision of liberty not as an emancipated slave but as a warrior who had been born free. He commented that liberty cannot always be preserved by peaceful measures and recommended that the statue be transformed into Minerva, the Roman Goddess of War and Wisdom, wearing a soldier's helmet. He was perhaps thinking of his own drawing (fig. 9), “Head of Minerva,” which he sketched in a drawing class at West Point in the



COURTESY WEST POINT MUSEUM

late 1820s. Meigs, a Northerner with strong feelings about the immorality of slavery, swallowed his pride and dutifully conveyed his boss's suggestions. Crawford needed no direct order to modify his design; he could read between the lines and submitted a final design minus the liberty cap. The irony of the statue—a symbol of freedom within a land legalizing slavery—was thereby denied a direct representation.<sup>20</sup>

In the final design, the three men honored the uniquely European and Native American imagery of an eagle headdress and the Native American symbol of connection between the heavens and earth. A medallion inscribed “US” secures her fringed robes. She wears a helmet encircled with stars and bearing an eagle's head, talons, and feathers; holds a sheathed sword, a shield with thirteen stripes, and a wreath; and stands on a globe encircled with the national motto E Pluribus Unum. The lower part of the base is decorated with Roman fasces (bundled rods) and wreaths.<sup>21</sup>



COURTESY PRIVATE COLLECTION



COURTESY UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE



**Fig. 11.** *The Statue of Freedom has been given many names. In this 1925 U.S. postage stamp, she is called America.*

*... don't think you can ever  
forget her*

*don't even try*

*she's not going to budge*

*no choice but to grant  
her space*

*crown her with sky*

*for she is one of the many*

*and she is each of us*

*~Rita Dove,  
"Lady Freedom Among Us"*

A year later, Crawford laid on his deathbed in Rome. His wife, Louisa, recorded his wishes regarding the statue. He suggested that the plaster model be transported from Rome, where it was sculpted, to Munich to be cast in bronze. In his reply, Captain Meigs, calling the statue "Liberty," insisted on promoting the arts in the United States by having it cast at a local foundry. The plaster model arrived in New York harbor on the ship *Emily Taylor* and later was taken for casting to the Clark Mills foundry just inside the District of Columbia boundary near Bladensburg, Maryland. Ironically, one of Mills' principal craftsmen, to whom he entrusted the casting of the plaster model in bronze, was one of his own enslaved men, Philip Reid. The statue was lifted atop the dome in sections in late 1863 as the Civil War raged on. The final section was erected at noon on December 2, to a salute of thirty-five guns (one for each state) from a field battery on Capitol Hill, answered by similar salutes from surrounding forts.<sup>22</sup> The statue quickly became a symbol of the Union's purpose and resolve to persevere (fig. 10).

## *The Twentieth Century: Freedom Becomes a Lady*

FORMER ARCHITECT OF THE CAPITOL GEORGE M. WHITE has observed that the history of the U.S. Capitol is "a story of signs and symbols because the Capitol has never been mere shelter; it is also an expression of national pride and perception."<sup>23</sup> The Statue of Freedom's identity has always been confusing, reflecting the origin and evolution of the American identity. She has sometimes been referred to as a goddess, as is the current Goddess of Liberty on top of the state capitol in Austin, Texas. The name America appeared in 1925 when the image of the Statue of Freedom was used on a red and blue U.S. postage stamp (fig. 11). A 1939 *New York Times* article described her as nineteen thousand pounds of the most misunderstood woman in Washington, D.C. In the twentieth century, when women were just getting the right to vote, this image became the Statue of Freedom, and when she was restored in 1993 after 130 years, the poet laureate of the United States referred to her as "Lady Freedom."

In the 1960s, Morrnah Simeona, a native Hawaiian woman, felt a strong connection with the statue while sitting on the Capitol lawn. In 1989, she helped author a bill to the Hawaiian House Committee on Intergovernmental Relations and International Affairs, "recognizing the Statue of Freedom as a symbol of World Peace and Freedom." Her organization, The Foundation of I, donated funds to the U.S. Capitol Preservation Commission to restore the original plaster model of the statue. The model (fig. 12a and 12b), which had been disassembled into sections and kept in storage at the Smithsonian for twenty-five years, was reassembled, restored, and placed on display in the basement rotunda of the Russell Senate Office Building in January 1993. The bronze Statue of Freedom was removed by helicopter from the dome on May 9, 1993 and its restoration and conservation work was watched over by thousands (fig. 13). As the statue was hoisted back atop the Capitol dome on Oct. 23, 1993, with grand celebration and another thirty-five gun salute, Architect of the Capitol George M. White observed, "Freedom reigns again," and historian David McCullough said, "Liberty is again in her place." Poet laureate Rita Dove composed a poem for the occasion entitled "Lady Freedom Among Us," and Liza Minnelli sang "America the Beautiful." Liberty, Freedom as a lady, and America—the associations were there for all to see.



BOTH, COURTESY SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Our U.S. Capitol holds an ideal at its pinnacle, the Statue of Freedom, but she has gone almost unnoticed. Today, as the United States creates policy and attempts to expand its influence worldwide in the name of liberty and freedom, it is imperative to continue this exploration of the roots of this image upon which these ideas are based. It is a story grounded in the idea of a woman as a symbol for America from both our nation's native and European heritages. Her strength and beauty is a source of inspiration to Americans and people worldwide. She is Thomas Crawford's armed goddess of Freedom, mistaken over the years for an Indian brave, Pocahontas with a sword, the Statue of Liberty, and Miss America. She is a reminder of the importance of women's contributions to American society and a powerful figure watching over us. ★

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***Fig. 12a and 12b. The plaster model of the Statue of Freedom, originally displayed in the Capitol, was later moved to the Smithsonian Institution. These photographs show the model in the Smithsonian, where it was later disassembled and placed in storage. The model was reassembled and placed in the Russell Senate Office Building in 1993. Current plans call for its installation in the United States Capitol Visitor Center.***



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**Fig. 13. In 1993 a helicopter lowered the Statue of Freedom to the east front plaza where conservators repaired pitting and corrosion on the bronze surface and restored its bronze green patina.**

## NOTES

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22. Allen, *History of the United States Capitol*, pp. 325-27; Fryd, *Art and Empire*, pp. 198-200.
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