

>> Janet Clemens: Women have been contributing Art to the Capitol since the time of the Civil War. What is the Capitol Collection and how are women represented through sculpture, both from the perspective of artists and its subjects. In this episode, we'll explore some aspects of this collection with special guest Dr Michele Cohen, curator for the Architect of the Capitol.

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You're listening to Shaping History: Women in Capitol Art, produced by the Capitol Visitor Center. Our mission is to inform, involve, and inspire every visitor to the United States Capitol. I'm your host Janet Clemens.

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I'm here with Dr. Michele Cohen, curator for the Architect of the Capitol. Dr. Cohen, welcome to the podcast.

>> Michele Cohen: Oh, thank you for having me.

>> Janet Clemens: So, a curator is charged with the care of the collection and as curator for the Architect of the Capitol, you're responsible for a lot of artworks in the Capitol Collection. This building is not just filled with art, it's covered with art I would say. And so, can you just sort of give us an overview of the kinds of artworks that fall under your scope?

>> Michele Cohen: So, our purview is primarily the architectural art associated with the Capitol Building and the Capitol campus. So, we oversee, for example, the maintenance and preservation of Freedom on top of the Capitol dome. We are responsible for maintaining the murals by Constantino Brumidi that are in the Senate wing, that are in the rotunda of the Capitol. And we also oversee the collection that's the National Statuary Hall Collection that consists of a hundred statues that each state has donated to.

>> Janet Clemens: In this podcast we've actually talked a lot about artworks that are in the National Statuary Hall Collection and some that are in the Capital Collection. Can you just tell us a little bit about what those two groups of artworks include and how they relate to each other?

>> Michele Cohen: So, it really has to do with the commissioning process, so, works that Congress commissioned directly, for example, would include the statue honoring Rosa Parks. And then there are also situations where works are gifted to Congress, and accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library. So, an example of that would be the Portrait Monument. The National Statuary Hall Collection is an interesting sort of partnership with states, because the states issue legislation; they decide who they want to honor, they raise the money to create the piece, they pay for the installation of the sculpture, but once it's here, we are responsible for its preservation. If the state elects to transfer a statue out, to replace a statute, the ownership actually reverts to the state when it leaves the building. So, the guidelines for Statuary Hall were first adopted in 1864, and at that time, they said that sculptures could only be made in these very permanent materials. They could either be bronze or marble, that the figure had to be deceased. The original language for the Statuary

Hall Collection specifically said a "male" figure to be honored and that that was changed, before the resolution was voted on, to be genderless. The impetus for forming the collection was really a desire to use a space that had been vacated. So, it was a way to use the abandoned old hall of the House of Representatives for another purpose. In 1857, Justin Morrill, who was then a congressman from Vermont eventually became a center- he was really the primary force behind the legislation that Congress eventually passed to establish Statuary Hall. He argued that this Greek revival hall, designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, was not appropriate for paintings because of the way that the columns interfered with the space; there really wasn't a lot of wall space, but it would be an appropriate setting for sculptures. And he also came up with a mechanism to pay for these sculptures. Well, if they were commissioned by states, then states would fund them at no cost to the federal government. So, the legislation was finally passed in 1864 and Morrill also understood that this was an opportunity to express national unity and to reinforce the symbolic purpose of the Capitol itself. At the time remember that the dome was nearing completion, so the entire collection of one hundred statues was finally completed in 2005. So, consider that's a very long time for when the idea-

>> Janet Clemens: Yeah.

>> Michele Cohen: Was first enacted in legislation and when the collection actually was complete. And that statue was commissioned by New Mexico representing Po'pay the Pueblo leader and healer. The very first statue to be placed in the collection honors Brigadier General Nathanael Greene by Henry Kirke Brown and Rhode Island presented that in 1870. So, even before Justin Morrill got this legislation passed, I mean it had been discussed really starting in the 1850's and it was a concept that we needed our own Hall of Fame; we should have an American Hall of Fame, sort of rivaling what was going on in France with the Pantheon and what was going on in Germany. And it was a mechanism to both let states express their own state identity, but also it sort of encouraged this idea of national unity.

>> Janet Clemens: And within that Statuary Hall Collection, those one hundred statues, there are currently a total of nine that are statues of women, correct?

>> Michele Cohen: Yes, that's correct.

>> Janet Clemens: So, let's go through a few of those together. I know the very first was a statue of Frances Willard that was given to us by the state of Illinois.

>> Michele Cohen: Yeah and that's an interesting commission because it also shows the power of patronage. Because it was a women's group really, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, that was spearheading the effort to commission the statue to honor Willard. And it was unveiled in 1905, the artist is Helen Farnsworth Mears. It's an all marble sculpture and Frances Willard was the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Mears really presents her standing at a podium, she's gazing intently at her audience, she's gathering her thoughts before beginning her address. And of course, even in the 19th Century, you know, it's really unusual for women to be orators. So, what this artist has to do is sort of use an iconographic trope, that we associate more with male figures, and convert that or sort of translate that for a female subject. And I think she does

it very forcefully. The figure's on a very high pedestal, and that was very purposeful, so that she wouldn't be dwarfed by male figures around her. And I also think the fact that it's all white was intentional to sort of convey this idea of purity. So, it's a combination of the act of honoring the subject, but also supporting women artistically. So, that's from 1905. The next statue was by Evelyn Raymond, another woman artist, and that depicts Maria Sanford, but that didn't happen till 1958, so you've got this very long period of time when no statues honoring women came into the collection. And then you sort of have this cluster. So, then you've got the Maria Sanford; a year later you have Dr. Florence Sabin, also by a woman artist, sculpted by Joy Buba, correct. And then, following her is Esther Hobart Morris from Wyoming. So, you've got this cluster in the late '50s and primarily they are western states. And that's an interesting sort of observation and part of it has to do with the fact that suffrage for women first appears in western states. Wyoming, for example, was one of the early adopters, so Esther Hobart Morris was a great crusader for women's suffrage and she also was a judge there and then in 1980's- so you've got 20 years, another 20 year jump and then you've got Mother Joseph by Felix de Weldon. He's most famous for doing the Iwo Jima Monument. And following Mother Joseph, then we have Jeannette Rankin, and the state of Montana sponsored that, and it wasn't commissioned till 1985 and that was followed by Sacajawea. And that is a copy of an existing sculpture, so that also, I guess, raises the point about how things come into the collection and how states go about commissioning them. And sometimes, what they do is, they fund a replica of an existing statute rather than go through a solicitation process to have an artist sculpt a new piece. So, that piece actually dates to 1909; the original by Leonard Crunelle and then Sarah Winnemucca by Benjamin Victor, who just did Chief Standing Bear that was recently unveiled from the State of Nebraska; that came into the collection in 2003. And then Helen Keller came into the collection, representing Alabama, in 2009 and that was an example of a replacement statute.

>> Janet Clemens: So, I want to talk about Marisol.

>> Michele Cohen: Right. It's interesting. She was really an art star; she was almost seen sort of as like this Greta Garbo, mysterious type, and she really became recognized just a few years before she won that commission. So, her whole name is Marisol Escobar but she preferred to really just be known as "Marisol" sort of in the vein of Madonna. And I think that it was sort of part of her mystique, that she was known really just by her one name. She had a very cosmopolitan upbringing. Her parents were Venezuelan, she grew up in Paris and then she spent some of her time in Caracas and then she went to private schools on Long Island and in California. I think she would have viewed herself as a cultural satirist. And I think part of it was her own silence. I mean, I think she had a very difficult childhood and really communicated through her art. And so, she was this very exotic beautiful woman who said very little.

>> Janet Clemens: Yes. Yeah you mentioned her background and her parents are Venezuelan, she's born in Paris. She, actually- around 1956, she was living in Italy. She said, "I am the Venezuelan, born in France, living in Italy, that has an English car, with North American plates and Swiss insurance and they want to ask me what nationality I am." So, we're absolutely-

>> Michele Cohen: Yeah, that's a great quote.

>> Janet Clemens: On target that she's an international figure.

>> Michele Cohen: And the other interesting about Marisol is that she was really part of a male circle of artists. So, you know, yeah she hung out with Warhol, she studied with Hans Hoffman; then she became really interested in William King's work who was also mining folk art traditions. And- and she very much espoused a lot of feminist ideas, but I don't know that she really identified herself as a woman artist.

>> Janet Clemens: I think that's something that is kind of a theme throughout our entire focus on women artists in the National Statuary Hall Collection.

>> Michele Cohen: Even the term "sculptress" is, you know, that's-

>> Janet Clemens: Yes.

>> Michele Cohen: not a term that we use in the 20th Century, but it was part of 19th Century language.

>> Janet Clemens: I was trying to research Blanche Nevin who is the artist who made the second statue in the Statuary Hall Collection that was contributed by a female artist.

>> Michele Cohen: Well- I think she was from Lancaster-

>> Janet Clemens: Yeah.

>> Michele Cohen: Pennsylvania. And that speaks to, sort of, the parochial nature of some of these commissions, where states want to commission an artist from their state. Whereas Hawaii did this international competition and they did solicit some designs, from like Jean Traleux [assumed spelling] who was really better known as a muralist, but he was living in Hawaii at the time, and you know, he was one of the competitors. So, because they cast that international net, they also got a very broad range of submissions. That whole prospectus is quite enlightened, and I think it really shows that the way something is framed is going to impact the result. And I think it was because of that that Marisol even submitted a proposal, because she was sort of an unlikely artist to compete for such a type of commission. This was not like her comfort zone.

>> Janet Clemens: Yeah, she didn't make a lot of public monuments.

>> Michele Cohen: I mean she definitely made cynical comments on monuments, but they were more gallery pieces or museum pieces. And so, I think she was attracted to this commission because of who it honored. It wasn't wishy satirizing political leaders and military figures. I think she had true admiration- she showed the ravages of leprosy, I mean she didn't hide that fact.

>> Janet Clemens: Yeah.

>> Michele Cohen: But, what's fascinating about that sculpture is that, the way that she was working at that time, was sort of in this "folk art traditions" as she would create these plywood constructions and then she would add even casts of her own body or found

objects. And so, she's sort of a hybrid of surreal pop art. And in creating the Father Damien, she also noted that, you know, not only did she so admire him, as this great humanitarian, but he also really loved wood, which she loved. So, her aesthetic approach to working with, sort of these plywood structures, and then creating these appendages worked so beautifully to convey, sort of, the solidity and the simplicity of Father Damien. And I think that the group that commissioned her really understood that despite the fact this wasn't a conventional bronze statue, Marisol, using her artistic vocabulary, really captured his essence in a way that other sculptors who competed did not. And they also were very proud that, being such a new state, 1959, they wanted a contemporary voice to represent them. And I think what's to me, really significant, about the Father Damien is that it is stylistically so distinctive and so different from all the other commissions. And the prospectus for that sculpture really, I think, allowed artists to be a little more inventive and creative because the group that was soliciting the design said, "Well, we really want to capture the spirit of Father Damien. We want it to be recognizable," but they didn't necessarily dictate that it had to be traditional.

>> Janet Clemens: Yeah let's maybe describe the statue a little bit because, as you mentioned earlier, it really stands out in the Statuary Hall Collection. And I had heard that she initially wanted to make it out of wood.

>> Michele Cohen: No, she understood that the final had to be bronze or marble. But what she did was use wood, in terms of conceiving the overall form. So, she used her typical working method and then created a bronze cast basically of a plywood sculpture that also had some modeled elements attached to it. So, it's a very sort of cubistic form; she's not trying to show a realistic body, but she's very much wanting to convey, sort of, the solidity, the dignity of the figure. And she does- the face is somewhat recognizable so, her typical form- and often she would do things that were group sculptures, but in her single figures she would use a plywood structure that she would often then paint. In this case, she's not using paint because this is a bronze cast, so she modeled the face originally in clay. And then in wax. And so, she's showing Father Damien wearing the priest garb, with a cloak over him which actually gives him even more presence. With the very typical hat and you also even see his shoes that are very sturdy working shoes and she places him on a very simple plinth, a rectangular plinth and then a cubic pedestal. He's holding a cane and he was known as a woodworker. So, she's paying homage to that as well. And there's an interesting pattern that you see is like a garment below the cloak and that's actually a sling that he wore to help support his arm. And that has a more decorative pattern. And she very much based the portrait on a one particular photo that showed him later in life, after he had already been suffering from leprosy. So, it's a very frontal sculpture. Sometimes artists are trying to create something to, sort of, encourage the visitor to move around the object. In this case, and most of her work actually, is quite frontal. Because it's this synthesis of a cubic form with a flat image on the surface. So, when you compare Father Damien, to everything else in the collection, where you see much more realistic anatomy, it really does stand out because its form is so distinctive. But despite this fact, and when it was commissioned actually, it created quite a controversy and there were those who supported and those that didn't. And even within the Hawaii state legislature, it was first rejected and then it was- Hawaii Senate overrode that, but during the course of that time, during the

course of the controversy, many people spoke up and I think their comments are very revealing. And they all feel like, "Well no, she really did capture Father Damien and he is recognizable and we like that it's a more modern depiction. That we're not using a 19th Century artistic [inaudible] and we're doing something that's really contemporary because Hawaii is a new state." And it's wonderful example of where an artist's aesthetic really matches the objective of the commission. I think if you look at some of the earlier pieces like there's a great piece by Daniel Chester French and the heightened realism of that, very much speaks to his role in the development American sculpture in the 1880's and the effect of his training in Paris, as well as his prior training in Italy. So, I think there are certain sculptural highlights that are great examples of what's best in American sculpture at that time. But, the Marisol commission really is so unique because her style is not a traditional figurative academic style.

>> Janet Clemens: Marisol made the statue of Father Damien for the Statuary Hall Collection. IF we can just talk for a moment about who he was.

>> Michele Cohen: So, Father Damien came from Belgium and he was quite young, he was a missionary priest and he went to Hawaii. And he decided that he really wanted to devote himself to the care of people who were segregated because of their leprosy. And he tended to them for about 15 years and eventually contracted leprosy himself and succumbed to it at quite a young man.

>> Janet Clemens: Right. He passed away, actually, at age 49, so quite young. And I read just a brief summary of some of the trials that the statue went through in order to go from her studio to the Capitol, that there were multiple models that had to be made the plaster-

>> Michele Cohen: Right.

>> Janet Clemens: Broke.

>> Michele Cohen: Right. So, the traditional way that you would make a bronze is you would first sculpt something, you'd do a maquette. And then, say once everyone agreed, "Yes, this is the basic presentation we like. We like the way the pose, we like with the figures wearing," then the artist would do like a full scale clay model. From that full scale clay model, you would make a plaster mold, a negative, and then- you would then create a plaster positive from that mold. It's quite a long process for casting bronze. And then, the plaster model is what's sent to the foundry. And then other molds would be made. Generally now they're made of gelatin, but in the 19th Century, they might have been plaster or sand casts were done. And from that mold the bronze would be poured. So, every bronze is a hollow statue, so you have to have a core and then you have a shell. And it's that space in between where the molten bronze is poured and forms the object. So, for Marisol though, she's not sculpting it originally in clay, she's creating a plywood construction and she's adding some sculpted elements to it. And so, she did make to plaster replicas of this plywood and both of them broke in transit. One was lost, one broke and eventually she actually made a wax mold of this and then that was used for creating the bronze cast.

>> Janet Clemens: Well, I do want to circle back to that because we have kind of a similar background with the statue Freedom which you mentioned at the very beginning. That the

process for getting that translated from the artist's clay to the plaster to the bronze, that we see on top of the statue, has a little bit of a journey too.

>> Michele Cohen: Well yes, and of course, that was cast after Thomas Crawford had died, so there was that issue. And pieces of it were lost in transit and then finally the- all five parts of it were put together and then they had to figure out how it could actually be disassembled.

>> Janet Clemens: Yeah and I just want to mention her because the statue Freedom, of course, is a female figure but she's an allegorical figure that I want to say that, within the scope of the artworks that we're talking about, there are women represented in other contexts, but we've been focusing on the women who are specific.

>> Michele Cohen: Well I mean when you think about the whole history of monumental art, of course, monumental art traditionally has heroized military figures or political figures, so women didn't have a strong role in those arenas. And starting really, with looking at classical Greek art, women were mythological figures or goddesses, but they weren't necessarily presented as active, sort of, figures with their own agency. And it's really only in the 20th Century where you start seeing women take on these active roles and certainly have been more seats in Congress than they ever had, so they're much more visible both in the political arena, in the cultural arena, and therefore it's going to be a much more typical thing to commission a statue honoring a woman today because of the role women play in society versus in the 19th Century when they really were marginalized. But they could somehow encapsulate these moral aspirations and women served as the four continents. They were freedom, they were the genius of America.

>> Janet Clemens: Right, they're using-

>> Michele Cohen: Had a lot of different roles.

>> Janet Clemens: Yeah, they're using them as kind of stand-ins. So, Dr. Cohen, I know you have a background in public art and now as curator of this tremendous collection, what are the things you enjoy most about being curator of Architect to the Capitol?

>> Michele Cohen: Well, it's a great challenge and it's also an opportunity to learn a tremendous amount. So, I've always been fascinated about how art can reflect politics, can reflect cultural trends, how a lot of times societal values that are maybe not overtly expressed are mirrored in art. So, I really enjoy, well, learning about, thinking about, and also caring for the art that is part of this building and I think it also poses a challenge for interpretation. Some of the art that was commissioned in the 19th Century is not art that we would commission today. And how can it be contextualized and how can we communicate to a contemporary audience?

>> Janet Clemens: Right.

>> Michele Cohen: It's a very interesting problem and it's also- I think too a great honor to be responsible for art that means so much to the nation and that also represents us internationally.

>> Janet Clemens: Yes, the building has been referred to as the "National Stage," and so to place these sculptures within it is almost putting them in as characters, in a drama, that I don't think many of them are necessarily made to speak to one another, but they do. And as a view of a collection.

>> Michele Cohen: Well they do and also it really reinforces the point that where art is matters. So, site matters. It's not just the object but it's where is it and how is it being viewed. So, art in association for the U. S. Capitol takes on tremendous power.

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>> Janet Clemens: With this incredible collection, as a resource, and interest in commemorating the 19th Amendment, staff at the Capitol are in a unique position to provide interpretation to visitors. In our next episode, you'll hear from some of my colleagues, at the Capitol Visitor Center, about how they created a specialty tour on women's suffrage.

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