Civic Virtue

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George Upton Harvey, Borough President of Queens for almost thirteen years, was attending a special ceremony.

It was October 18, 1941. Fourteen months before, Harvey had dedicated the new, nearby Queens Borough Hall, on Queens Boulevard, off Union Turnpike. He would get little satisfaction from the building; within a month of this October date, he would lose his reelection bid to Democratic candidate James A. Bunke.

But, he had his statue. He had tried, since 1932, to get *Civic Virtue*. Finally, on December 20, 1940, the Board of Estimate voted $23,000 “carfare” to remove the 57-ton marble statue from City Hall to Queens Boulevard.

Frederick MacMonnies’ work finally had a permanent home.

The politically-savvy Borough President, whose four predecessors had left office due to major scandals, must have had a small private laugh when City Council President Newbold Morris said that “*Civic Virtue* never had a chance.” What Morris didn’t say before the fifty invited guests on the platform and the two hundred citizen passers-by were his comments during the Board of Estimate vote, that “The statue is one of the most dreadful enormities of another age.” Morris didn’t want the statue shown anywhere in the city; he favored it being used as landfill.

Blame Angelina Crane.

When Mrs. Crane died, in New York in 1904, she bequeathed $60,000 to the city for a statue of Civic Virtue to adorn City Hall Park.

Fighting lawsuits from the relatives of Mrs. Crane, the city took five years to hire the famed Beaux-Arts sculptor Frederick William MacMonnies, a Brooklyn-born (1863), French-trained individual whose success in France and America was due to a degree of daring innovation and, in the end, giving the public and his well-heeled patrons what they wanted: classic statues to match themes close to their hearts.

Blame Frederick MacMonnies.

Completed in 1914 in the sculptor's Normandy studio, *Civic Virtue* was conceived as a statue of a well-built youth, carrying a sword over his shoulder, standing over sirens labeled "vice" and "corruption" — topics familiar to city residents of the "Gilded Age." Older residents could remember Boss Tweed.

MacMonnies had the statue buried under straw and placed underground from 1914 on, to avoid German bombs during the Great War.

To the crowd at the City Hall ceremonies in March 1922, the unveiled *Civic Virtue* statue should have stayed underground or been blown up. To the embarrassment of Mayor John F. Hyland, the polite applause soon led to hisses and boos.

Why?

Vice and corruption were depicted as defeated women under the dominance of a male figure, signifying virtue.

Women had just received the right to vote in federal elections, a triumph they had secured after seventy years of struggle. They were also leaving their homes, in their teenage years, not necessarily to marry, but to ***work***, not only in factories but in offices. In clothes, personal habits and ***thinking*** there was a growing female revolution.

The New York City Federation of Women's Clubs protested the position of the

marble females. Further criticism came from the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the National League of Women Voters. One woman had it right when, during Mayor Hyland's open hearing on whether the statue should stay in City Hall Park, she stated that "We do not believe that the human race regards man as a symbol of virtue and women as a symbol of vice. Neither has a monopoly on virtue."

The National Academy of Design stood firm. The statue of *Civic Virtue* remained in City Hall Park, with its back to the mayor's offices, until 1941. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia ofttimes expressed his anger at the experience of ascending the City Hall steps, turning, and viewing the backside of the disliked work of art.

MacMonnies, very well-off, praised for his other works and happily married late in life, was unperturbed by the criticism.

After all, his early, small bronze *Bacchante and Infant-Faun* was banned from the Boston Public Library in 1897 for its image (to critics) of "wanton, blatant nudity and drunkenness." Harvard's Charles Eliot Norton's signature was at the head of a petition opposed to the placement. The work was gratefully received by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

MacMonnies had won out. His reputation had increased due to the publicity and defense by other critics, one of whom stated that the statue was "the embodiment of grace and beauty."

His other works endure. *Nathan Hale*, called by an over-enthusiastic Henry Marquard, President of the Metropolitan Museum as "among the finest works we have ever produced in this country," is in City Hall Park. His friezes adorn Washington Square Arch, and his works highlight both ends of Prospect Park.

See his Brooklyn work. On top of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Arch, in Grand Army Plaza, is the magnificent *Quadriga* (a chariot drawn by four horses abreast), while his two "colossal groups" are in front of the piers, in easy view of the interested. They are entitled *The Army* and *The Navy*, and succeed in conveying the spirit of patriotism which enabled the Union to win the Civil War.

MacMonnies' *James S.T. Stranahan* was dedicated in 1892 to the man who guided the development of Prospect Park. It is a fine work.

His monumental *Horse Tamers* is a praised study, on the other end of Prospect Park, at Park Circle, that shows the triumph of mind over brute power.

Blame George Upton Harvey.

Harvey had a humorous side. When criticism of *Civic Virtue* reached the conservative Republican Borough President, he said that the downtrodden objects "weren't women but fish." A close look can almost confirm Harvey's assessment of the sirens.

A quick rejoinder, by the three-term City Councilman, to dislike at Queens' new prize, was that "Any time I can get anything for free from Manhattan, I'll take it." How can you argue with that statement?

His threat to move to Canada, if President Roosevelt was reelected in 1940, never materialized.

Harvey, born in Ireland and educated in this country and Ireland, was an authentic World War I hero. Fighting in France, he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. As part of the 77th Division (but not the "Lost Battalion"), Harvey was highly praised.

He would use his own army background to great political effect to win elections

and reelections.

George Upton Harvey had charges brought against him for misuse of office, especially one for improper borrowing of money — but Governor Franklin Roosevelt didn't think the charges serious enough to recommend removal from office.

One LaGuardia biographer considered Harvey "a right-winger who could generally be counted upon to oppose progressive measures before the Board of Estimate." He was thought of as unsympathetic to labor. The "Little Flower," however, needed those Queens Republican and independent Democratic votes, so Harvey and he would fight from afar and be together for great public celebrations, such as the opening of the eight IND Queens Boulevard subway stations on December 30, 1936.

Harvey liked public ceremonies, such as the leasing, in Rego Park on July 19, 1938, of the Queens Community Center to the 77th Division organization. He named the building "Lost Battalion Hall."

We are getting away from *Civic Virtue*.

The Borough President thought he had the last word (October 18, 1941) on the subject:

> "I have been kicked around for years just as the statue has. I felt that he and I had so much in common that, if he were over here, near my office, I could come out here sometimes and we could tell each other our troubles."

George Upton Harvey lasted another three months in office; *Civic Virtue* is still with us. See it.