



The Long Story of Statues of Columbus: Revisiting Cultural Heritage Symbols in the United States

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Keywords:

Christopher Columbus, Monument, Identity; Colonialism; Community.

ABSTRACT:

One of the most celebrated, glorified, studied, questioned, and attacked historical personalities, Christopher Columbus is undeniably a significant component of American identity. A contemporary icon for a large part of the Italian American community, Columbus was regularly mentioned and celebrated as early as the Founding Fathers. For a long period, the Italian American community was the victim of racism and discrimination, and the figure of Columbus was also intended to alleviate such suffering by recognizing the positive contribution of Italians to America. Over time, criticisms of Columbus's historical figure began to emerge, only to multiply more recently. Such criticism coincided with several factors, but the development of historical analysis—particularly of colonialism and slavery—and the increased focus on the history and rights of Indigenous peoples and of African Americans were (and still are) crucial. The history of the monuments of Columbus is linked to the complex, painful, multifaceted relationship between the United States and its Italian American community, and the United States and its Native American and African American communities. To deal with the impasse, new approaches should be conceived, not to divert but to broaden attention to constructive and creative factors for more open and forward-looking thinking.

Tra i personaggi storici più celebrati, glorificati, studiati, messi in discussione e attaccati, Cristoforo Colombo è senza dubbio una componente significativa dell'identità americana. Icona contemporanea per gran parte della comunità italo-americana, Colombo è stato regolarmente ricordato e celebrato fin dai tempi dei Padri Fondatori. Per un lungo periodo, la comunità italo-americana fu vittima di razzismo e discriminazione, e la figura di Colombo fu intesa anche come un modo per alleviare tali sofferenze, riconoscendo il contributo positivo dato dagli italiani all'America. Con il passare del tempo, critiche alla figura storica di Colombo cominciarono a emergere, per poi moltiplicarsi recentemente. Tali critiche coincisero con diversi fattori, ma lo sviluppo dell'analisi storica, in particolare del colonialismo e della schiavitù, e l'aumentato interesse per la storia e i diritti dei popoli indigeni e degli afroamericani furono (e sono tuttora) cruciali. La storia dei monumenti dedicati a Colombo è legata alla complessa, dolorosa e articolata relazione tra gli Stati Uniti e la loro comunità italo-americana, e tra gli Stati Uniti e le loro comunità native americane e afroamericane. Per affrontare questa situazione di stallo, dovrebbero essere concepiti nuovi approcci, non per deviare, ma per ampliare l'attenzione verso fattori costruttivi e creativi rivolti a un pensiero più aperto e lungimirante.

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Opening Picture:

Fig. 02: Detroit Publishing Co., publisher
Columbus statue, Boston, Mass - 1902
Library of Congress, Washington (D.C.)

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The Construction of a Symbol

One of the most celebrated, glorified, studied, questioned, and attacked historical personalities, Christopher Columbus is undeniably a significant component of American identity:

“More than 6,000 places in the U.S. took their name from Christopher Columbus. There’s Columbus in Ohio (and Indiana and Arkansas and New York and Wisconsin, and many other states), not to mention the District of Columbia. There are streets and avenues and traffic circles and parks, along with lakes and rivers and mountains—defining features of the nation’s civic and natural geography. ... There are also 149 public monuments to Columbus, which makes him the third most venerated figure among U.S. monuments and memorials. ... Only Abraham Lincoln and George Washington enjoy greater presence in American statuary.”¹

A contemporary icon for a large part of the Italian American community, Columbus became an object of exaltation as early as the late eighteenth century, as a representative of the “European genius” who first set foot on the American continent. Initially, it was really about a man becoming a symbol of European culture, not strictly Catholic but more generically Christian, who through courageous and ambitious exploratory enterprises had opened the door to the New World. In that sense, Columbus linked to a larger group of white and Christian Americans: he represented the pioneers, settlers, and brave leaders of independent America. Nothing was specifically related to the Italian presence in the United States, certainly

not in the eighteenth century and first part of the nineteenth century, a period that did not even record a significant number of immigrants from the Italic peninsula.²

Columbus was regularly mentioned and celebrated as early as the Founding Fathers, as in this note by John Adams in 1775: “This Committee soon purchased and filled five Vessels. The first We named Alfred in honor of the founder of the greatest Navy that ever existed. The second Columbus after the Discover[er] of this quarter of the Globe. The third Cabot, for the Discoverer of this northern Part of the Continent. The fourth Andrew Doria in memory of the Great Genoese Admiral and the fifth Providence, for the Town where she was purchased.”³

In 1784 an important academic institution of New York City, too, took Columbus’s name. Originally founded as King’s College in 1754, Columbia University now owes its name to him:

“The American Revolution brought the growth of the college to a halt, forcing a suspension of instruction in 1776 that lasted for eight years. However, the institution continued to exert a significant influence on American life through the people associated with it. Among the earliest students and trustees of King’s College were John Jay, the first chief justice of the United States; Alexander Hamilton, the first secretary of the treasury; Gouverneur Morris, the author of the final draft of the U.S. Constitution; and Robert R. Livingston, a member of the five-man committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence. The college reopened in 1784 with a new name—Columbia—that embodied

the patriotic fervor that had inspired the nation's quest for independence."⁴

On October 12, 1792, three centuries after his arrival, Columbus was celebrated in New York, as reported by newspapers:

"Last evening the 3d century of the discovery of America (alias Columbia) by Christopher Columbus, was celebrated in this city, by the Tammany Society or Columbian Order. On this occasion, a portable monumental obelisk was exhibited at the great Wigwam, amid the plaudits of the beholders—Brother John B. Johnson, agreeable to appointment, addressed the Society with an animated Eulogy on this nautical hero and astonishing adventurer, with great applause—a number of patriotic songs were sung, and toasts given suitable to the occasion."⁵

In 1808 Thomas Jefferson wrote that the United States was the "great Continent which the Genius of Columbus has given to the world."⁶ Subsequently, when Jefferson was in Europe, he commissioned copies of the portraits of Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Hernán Cortés, and Ferdinand Magellan that were in the Gioviana Collection of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence: "While I resided at Paris, knowing that these portraits, & those of some other of the early American worthies were in the gallery of Medicis at Florence, I took measures for engaging a good artist to take and send me copies of them. I considered it as even of some public concern that our country should not be without the portraits of its first discoverers."⁷

In 1816 Jefferson wrote to Joseph Delaplaine, a publisher who print-

ed a series of engravings, with biographical notes, of distinguished Americans: "Sir, Yours of the 11th is just received, and with it the head of Columbus for which accept my thanks. It has been evidently taken at an earlier period of his life than that of the Florentine gallery, which I think you will deem worthy of taking additionally."⁸

The U.S. Congress published a Printed Resolution for the Portrait of Columbus and Distribution of the Declaration of Independence in 1824: "Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Portrait of Columbus, presented to the nation by G.G. Barrell, United States' Consul in Malaga, be placed in the Library of Congress."⁹

In New York in 1888, the Italian publisher Vincenzo Polidori launched a newspaper titled "Cristoforo Colombo," in Italian, as a "Giornale quotidiano indipendente, Organo delle colonie italiane in America," with the exhortation, "Honorate il grande genovese; Gloria d'Italia." Publication of this paper continued until 1897.¹⁰

Benjamin Harrison, twenty-third president of the United States, officially celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in America in 1892:

"Now, therefore, I, Benjamin Harrison, President of the United States of America ... do hereby appoint Friday, October 21, 1892, the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America by Columbus, as a general holiday for the people of the United States. On that day let the people, so far as possible, cease from toil and devote themselves to such ex-

ercises as may best express honor to the discoverer and their appreciation of the great achievements of the four completed centuries of American life. Columbus stood in his age as the pioneer of progress and enlightenment.”¹¹

In that same year, on October 12, a standing Christopher was inaugurated in Columbus Circle, New York City. The Carrara marble statue, on a granite column with bronze bas-reliefs, was made by the Italian sculptor Gaetano Russo and donated by Italian Americans led by Carlo Barsotti, editor of “*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*.”¹² Barsotti’s daughter, Annie, unveiled the statue, and her mother, Ms. Barsotti, delivered an address. Newspapers reported that the ceremony occurred “amid the cheering of thousands of patriotic sons of Italy, Spain, and America.”¹³ The concluding remarks were given by Luigi Palma di Cesnola, first director of the Metropolitan

Museum of Art.¹⁴ Barsotti had written to the secretary of the Park Department in 1889 with the idea of a statue celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the Americas. In his letter, Barsotti emphasized not only the growing number of Italian immigrants in the United States, but also their continued love for their home country: “We wish it to be a colossal work of art which may be seen from the harbor. There are not less than a quarter of a million Italians in the United States today, and their number is steadily increasing. Their love of fatherland is such that all will contribute to this monument.”¹⁵

Even before the unveiling in October, there had already been occasions of celebration, such as for the arrival of the statue in New York harbor on the Italian ship *Garigliano* that September. Many notables participated, including Giuseppe Garibaldi’s son Lieutenant Manlio,



Fig. 01: Harris & Ewing, photographer Columbus Memorial, Statue Of Columbus. United States--District of Columbia--Washington (D.C.) 1912 Library of Congress, Washington (D.C.).

whose presence generated great curiosity and excitement:

“There was great curiosity to see young Garibaldi. He is tall, handsome, with brilliant brown eyes that contrast, effectively, with his blond mustache. He had expected to be ordered back to Italy within two weeks and was delighted to receive a cable message from his government last night directing him to remain here until the arrival of the Italian war ship Giovanni Bausan, on October 12, to take part in the Columbian celebration. A crowd of Americans and Italians gathered in front of the club when the reception broke up all anxious to see Lieutenant Garibaldi. When he appeared, they followed and cheered him until he boarded a downtown car.”¹⁶

And then there was the laying of the cornerstone:

“A little bit of the land that Christopher Columbus discovered, set aside for a monument in his honor, was crowded with the descendants of his contemporaries yesterday afternoon, and with true Italian gayety, with the music of bands and with the red, white and green flag of Italy twined in the Stars and Stripes, the corner stone of the monument was laid. ... Before the ceremonies of placing the corner stone in position eighty Italian societies assembled in Washington square and marched up Fifth avenue to the circle. In his speech, Signor Barsotti said: “... this monument, erected by the Italians here, is not simply and exquisite, preeminent representation of historical thoughts and ideas ... but it is rather, before all and above all, a symbol of religion, human and universal; an altar which should be regarded with reverence by all, fortu-

nate or unfortunate, who come here in quest of fortune, of work or peace and who find what they seek.”¹⁷

Just a few hours after the cornerstone ceremony, harsh observations—critical of celebrations seen as antithetical to the reality of Italian immigrants in New York—were published in the *New York Herald* by Ida M. Van Etten, author, activist, and first secretary of the Working Women’s Society of New York:

“The four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus finds his countrymen in New York the most miserable conditioned and exploited class of proletarians in the New World. If, in connection with the parades and fetes incident upon the Columbus celebration, there could be added a procession of the whole wretched population of the Italian quarter it would be more significant and instructive than all the civic and military display that has yet been arranged. If the visiting Italians, instead of being entertained by dinners, receptions and pageants, would visit the tenements of Mulberry Bend and investigate the causes of its poverty and misery—so much greater than that of any other foreign quarter—some real good might be done by the celebration of the Columbus anniversary. Perhaps they would then realize the folly of erecting a hundred-thousand-dollar statue to Columbus while over a hundred thousand of his countrymen are in the midst of most frightful mental, moral and physical degradation.”¹⁸

A shocking anti-Italian event had already occurred the previous year, on March 14, in New Orleans. After surrounding a prison and shouting

racist insults, a mob of thousands of angry men shot dead and mutilated eleven men of Italian origin in front of a cheering crowd. Although found not guilty of murdering the town's police chief, these eleven men were executed by a crowd driven by uncontrollable discriminatory and racist motives¹⁹. No one was found responsible for the lynching, and the perpetrators went unpunished. This sad and violent event would go down in history as one of the darkest moments of anti-Italian discrimination in the United States, but rejection and discrimination motivated by various reasons continued even afterward.

Given this heavy background—which had also led to serious friction between the U.S. and Italian governments—President Benjamin Harrison saw the celebration of Columbus as an opportunity to ease the diplomatic crisis and at the same time gain the trust of Italian Americans. Congress thus passed Proclamation 335, establishing a holiday for Americans to celebrate Columbus, on October 21, 1892.²⁰

“Salacious newspaper accounts, however, vilified them as monsters worthy of mob violence. Newspaper stories echoed the mainstream belief that Italians were savages. Protestant Americans believed the Italians were natural-born criminals who were more loyal to the Pope than to the United States. The president decided to use the office of the president to acknowledge the contributions of Italians and Italian Americans to the United States. An American president, for the first time, would affirm officially the rightful place of Italians in the fabric of American life, turning a new

page in how Protestant America saw Catholic immigrants.”²¹

Two years later, on May 12, 1894, a bronze statue of Christopher Columbus by the Spanish sculptor Jeronimo Suñol was unveiled in Central Park, New York City, not far from the statue in Columbus Circle inaugurated in 1892.²² Once again, the ceremony was grand and attracted many dignitaries from New York state and Washington, DC, including Vice President Adlai Ewing Stevenson and representatives of New York's elite:

“Mr. Stevenson responded to the hearty greeting offered him with a low bow, adjusted his gold glasses and said: “This hour will live in history. Central Park, beautiful and magnificent, is the fitting place for the statue of Columbus. It is well that to the city of New York—the metropolis of the continent—should have fallen the grateful task of portraying to the millions of all the coming ages the features of the man who, despite obstacle and danger, marked out the pathway to the New World. The name and fame of Columbus belong exclusively to no age or country. They are the enduring heritage of all people. Your president has truly said: ‘In all the transactions of history there is no act which, for vastness and performance, can be compared to the discovery of the continent of America.’”²³

In the same “Herald” report, we read that the famous writer Julia Ward Howe was also among the celebrities involved in the celebrations, despite her gender: “In introducing Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, General Wilson said he was making a great innovation in asking a woman to participate in a ceremony of this



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sort. Mrs. Howe read a poem with she had composed for the occasion, entitled 'A Mariner's Dream.' It was the story of Columbus in verse. The innovation was rapturously received."

In 1900 the famous tycoon John Pierpont Morgan donated a *Portrait of a Man, Said to be Christopher Columbus*, by the Italian painter Sebastiano del Piombo in 1519, to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. It is still on view today.²⁴

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared Columbus Day a national holiday in 1934:

"Now, Therefore, I, Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States of America, under and by virtue of the authority vested in me by the aforesaid public resolution, do by this proclamation designate October 12 of each year as Columbus Day and do direct that on that day the flag of the United States be displayed on all Government buildings; and, further, I do invite the people

of the United States to observe the day with appropriate ceremonies in schools and churches, or other suitable places."²⁵

It became a federal holiday in 1971, celebrated on the second Monday in October.

A Symbol Questioned and Then Destroyed

Over time, criticisms of Columbus's historical figure began to emerge, only to multiply more recently. Such criticism coincided with several factors, but the development of historical analysis—particularly of colonialism and slavery—and the increased focus on the history and rights of Indigenous peoples and of African Americans were (and still are) crucial.

Numerous social and political associations and groups committed to resisting racism, discrimination, and assimilation, and to protecting and enhancing their cultural identity, were established in the twentieth

Fig. 03:
Rizzuto, Angelo,
photographer
Columbus Celebration,
New York. View of
Christopher Columbus
statue on top of Columbus
Circle
1892
Library of
Congress, Washington (D.C.).



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century in the United States. By 1909 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was active, with the mission of combating discrimination and racism. A turning point was the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.²⁶ A year later Rosa Parks, an NAACP activist in Alabama, refused to give up her seat on a bus in favor of a white passenger. In 1963 Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, and the following years President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act.

The National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) was founded in 1961, and the American Indian Movement (AIM) was established in 1968. In the 1970s important legislative measures were taken regarding Native

Americans: the Indian Education Act of 1972, the Indian Health Care Improvement Act of 1976, and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, to mention a few.²⁷

With international resonance, in the 1970s, José R. Martínez Cobo of Ecuador, U.N. special rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, was commissioned not only to study the conditions of discrimination against Indigenous peoples but also to propose national and international recommendations for the elimination of such discrimination. Cobo presented most of his report between 1981 and 1984; the final part was published in 1987.²⁸ Interestingly, almost a century before, in 1874, Aaron Goodrich had authored a book titled *A History of the Character and Achievements of*

Fig. 04:
Landing of Columbus
1869
Litography
Library of Congress,
Washington (D.C.).

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the So-called Christopher Columbus, several parts of which were dedicated to Columbus's cruelty.²⁹

Cruelty remained one of the major criticisms against Columbus through the years. In 1942 Samuel Eliot Morison wrote a book on Columbus that exalted him as a skilled sailor but also mentioned his cruelty against the natives: "So the policy and acts of Columbus for which he alone was responsible began the depopulation of the terrestrial paradise that was Hispaniola in 1492. Of the original natives, estimated by a modern ethnologist at 300,000 in number, one-third were killed off between 1494 and 1496."³⁰

American Indian author Jack D. Forbes wrote a book with the provocative title *Columbus and Other Cannibals* in 1978. It was a history of the genocide of Native Americans as seen from their point of view; the volume confronted the reader with a view totally opposite of the usual glorification of Western "civilization." In 1980 Howard Zinn spoke at length about Columbus in his analysis of the different perspectives on the history of America—with its heroes and victims—over time:

"Thus began the history, five hundred years ago, of the European invasion of the Indian settlements in the Americas. That beginning, when you read Las Casas—even if his figures are exaggerations (were there 3 million Indians to begin with, as he says, or less than a million, as some historians have calculated, or 8 million as others now believe?)—is conquest, slavery, death. When we read the history books given to children in the United States, it all starts with heroic adventure—there is no bloodshed—and Columbus

Day is a celebration."³¹

Ten years later Kirkpatrick Sale went deeper and presented his historical allegation in an even more forceful and direct way:

"That the Quicentennial that ends this latest century will be celebrate with more commotion and ceremony than ever before there is no question, though whether it will have much to do with the man it is supposed to commemorate there is real reason to doubt. ... Many of those who know well the cultures that once existed in the New World have reason to be less than enthusiastic about celebrating the event that led to the destruction of much of that heritage and the greater part of the people who produced it; some have insisted on labeling the events of 1492 an "encounter" rather than a "discovery" ... others still are planning to protest the entire goings-on as a wrongful commemoration of an act steeped in bloodshed, slavery, and genocide."³²

The harsh critique and historical analysis of the violence and abuses of Columbus and all the Europeans who, like him, had contributed to the colonization processes was also joined by the general theory that Columbus discovered nothing: the Americas had long been inhabited by a great diversity of peoples and cultures. Columbus's greatest guilt remained linked to the fact that his arrival originated centuries of slavery and genocide.

The Charleston church massacre in June 2015 and the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 marked an important turning point.³³ Both events prompted a series of social and political reactions; acts of protest included the removal or vandaliza-

tion of monuments and memorials associated with social injustice and racism. These events not only affected the United States but spread—or linked—to many other regions of the world.³⁴ Columbus statues were of course not the only target of such actions: other clear objects of resentment were the statues of leaders of the Confederate States of America and of colonizers and slavers.

Between these two events, New York City was in the spotlight and had to address the issue of the Columbus statues in a public and official way. In 2017 Mayor Bill De Blasio stated that the statues would require an analysis conducted by experts from all sides. He announced the establishment of a special commission to study and evaluate the question of public art and historic monuments and markers on property owned by the city. This Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers, co-chaired by the president of the Ford Foundation, Darren Walker, and the commissioner of cultural affairs, Tom Finkelpearl, produced a forty-two-page report in January 2018. It stated that “a majority of Commission members advocated for keeping the Columbus statue and fostering public dialogue,” while “a group of Commission members advocated for removing the Columbus statue and fostering public dialogue.”³⁵

Especially after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, Columbus statues became one of the main targets of protest against racism and police brutality in several cities across America. The mayor of Chicago had three Columbus statues removed in July 2020, and as of October 2023 they were still in storage.

Negotiations on a resolution of the issue are currently underway between the city of Chicago and representatives of the Italian American community.³⁶

Similarly, in 2020 a statue of Christopher Columbus was removed from a square in Providence, Rhode Island, after being splashed with red paint and with an inscription “Stop Celebrating Genocide.” Put in storage, the statue was eventually purchased by former Providence mayor Joseph Paolino Jr., who then offered it as a gift to the city of Johnston, which put it on display. There were many protests, including from some Italian Americans who said there were better ways to honor Italian heritage “without celebrating someone who is the exact opposite of what Italian culture is.”³⁷ In Pittsburgh, a legal battle over a statue of Columbus removed from a city square has lasted for years. An Italian American group wants the court to overturn the ruling that allowed the statue’s removal.³⁸ As an observer noted in 2021, “at least 36 monuments to Columbus have been removed since the 1970s”; nonetheless many people still resist such moves.³⁹

In 2020, in his final months in office, President Donald Trump issued Executive Order 13933, “Protecting American Monuments, Memorials, and Statues and Combating Recent Criminal Violence,” “to ensure that our historic monuments and statues will be protected,” and Executive Order 13934, “Building and Rebuilding Monuments to American Heroes.” Both were designed as a response to riots following the murder of George Floyd. Trump intended to override the prerogative of states



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and local governments in dealing with protests by expanding and imposing federal government policy.⁴⁰ Executive Order 13933 was revoked by President Joe Biden's Executive Order 14029 on May 14, 2021. Biden was also the first president to mark, in 2021, Indigenous Peoples' Day.⁴¹

Many people have seen Biden's decision as a way to counterbalance the federal holiday celebrating Columbus with a recognition of Native peoples. One of the many legal experts dealing with the issue, Professor Jessica Owley, explained that the situation covers a wide area referring to different contexts. There are monuments that are publicly funded and built on public land, and there are those that are privately funded and rest on private land. What's interesting, however, is that most monuments fall somewhere in between, in a hybrid situation.⁴²

The debate about the statues obviously did not spare the places of central power either. In February 2023 two members of the House of Representatives and one senator reintroduced their bicameral legislative proposal to remove Confederate statues from the Capitol:

"Today, Congresswoman Barbara Lee (CA-12), Congressman Bennie Thompson (MS-02), and Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ) reintroduced their bicameral bill to remove Confederate statues from the U.S. Capitol. The Confederate Monument Removal Act, originally introduced by Congresswoman Lee after the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville in 2017, would remove all statues of people who voluntarily served for the Confederate States of America from the National Statuary Hall Collection within 120 days of the bill being signed into law."⁴³

Fig. 05:
Demonstration
against Christopher Columbus
in La Paz

Not surprisingly, Mellon Foundation, one of the top philanthropic foundations in the United States, in 2020 launched the Monuments Project, a multiyear initiative with a \$500 million budget, “to express, elevate, and preserve the stories of those who have often been denied historical recognition, and explore how we might foster a more complete telling of who we are as a nation. The Foundation’s commitment to the Monuments Project reflects both the urgency and the gravity of fostering more complete and inclusive storytelling of who we are as Americans.”⁴⁴ During a phase of destruction, Mellon’s approach is creative and a countertrend since it aims at supporting new monuments to be added in public spaces, to design new *commemorative landscapes* and settings, and to include more groups and communities so as to offer a more complete history of the country:

“Today, our public realm disproportionately celebrates a limited few and overlooks the multitudes who have made and shaped our society, limiting our understanding of our collective history. This failure to represent our multiplicity impacts how we perceive, distribute, and demonstrate power in the US. ... The Foundation’s commitment to the Monuments Project reflects both the urgency and the gravity of fostering more complete and inclusive storytelling of who we are as Americans.”⁴⁵

The history of the monuments of Columbus is linked to the complex, painful, multifaceted relationship between the United States and its Italian American community, and the United States and its Native

American and African American communities. For many decades after their arrival, the Italian American community was the victim of racism and discrimination, and the figure of Columbus was intended to alleviate such suffering by recognizing the positive contribution of Italians to America. On the other hand, for Native Americans and descendants of slaves, Columbus represented instead a vivid reminder of the genocide as well of the beginning of the slave trade.⁴⁶

Certainly, the issue is not resolved and will not end there. In the meantime, numerous observers have suggested alternative historical figures who might be less problematic, but so far that suggestion has not really undermined Columbus’ symbolic power to any great extent⁴⁷. In this impasse, approaches such as the Mellon Foundation’s can offer a new tool, not to divert but to broaden attention to constructive and creative factors for more open and forward-looking thinking.

Endnotes

- 1 Capps 2021.
- 2 The Old Immigration, or first big flow of foreigners to the United States in the nineteenth century, consisted mostly of Germans, Irish, British, and Scandinavians. The major immigration of Italians began at the end of the nineteenth century and belonged to the New Immigration, which was the largest wave of European immigrants and consisted mostly of Jews, Slavs, and Italians. See Choate 2008, p. 1.
- 3 “In Congress, November and December 1775,” Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-03-02-0016-0044>. Original source: Butterfield 1961, pp. 349–51.
- 4 History of Columbia University, <https://www.columbia.edu/content/history-columbia-university>.
- 5 *New-York, October 13... 1792*, p. 3.
- 6 “From Thomas Jefferson to João Maria José Luis, 5 May 1808,” Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-7966> (early access document from the Papers of Thomas Jefferson).
- 7 “Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Delaplaine, 3 May 1814,” Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-07-02-0249>. Original source: Looney 2010, pp. 340–42.
- 8 “Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Delaplaine, 20 May [1816],” Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-10-02-0041>. Original source: Looney 2013, p. 71.
- 9 *Congress, Printed Resolution for the Portrait of Columbus and Distribution of the Declaration of Independence*, June 26, 1824, manuscript/mixed material, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mtjbib025048/>.
- 10 “Cristoforo Colombo” (New York), 1888–1897, newspaper, Library of Congress. Polidori was also cofounder, with Carlo Barsotti, of “Il Progresso Italo-Americano,” New York’s most popular Italian American newspaper from 1879 until 1988.
- 11 Harrison 1792.
- 12 Top inscription: “To Christopher Columbus / the Italians resident in America, / scoffed at before, / during the voyage, menaced, / after it, chained, / as generous as oppressed, / to the world he gave a world.” Bottom inscription: “Joy and glory / never uttered a more thrilling call / that that which resounded / from the conquered ocean / in sight of the first American island /land! land! on the xii of October MDCCCXCII / the fourth centenary / of the discovery of America / in imperishable remembrance.” Top Italian inscription: “A Cristoforo Colombo / gli italiani residenti in America / irriso prima / minacciato durante il viaggio / incatenato dopo / sapendo esser generoso quanto oppresso / donava un mondo al mondo.” Bottom Italian inscription: “La gioia e la gloria / non ebbero mai piu solenne grido / di ouello che risuono in vista / della prima isola americana / terra! terra! nel 12 ottobre 1892 / quarto centenario / della scoperta d’America / a imperitura memoria.” Source: Official website of the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/central-park/monuments/299>.
- 13 *The Voyager in Marble... 1892*, p. 11.
- 14 *The Voyager in Marble... 1892*, p. 11.
- 15 *A Monument to Columbus... 1889*, p. 3.
- 16 *Italian Officers Feted... 1892*, p. 6.
- 17 *Laid the Corner Stone... 1892*, p. 9.
- 18 *Shocking Plight... 1892*, p. 11.
- 19 “Under Attack”, Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History, Library of Congress,

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/italian/under-attack/>.

20 Harrison 1792.

21 Nevaer 2020.

22 *Presentation of the Suñol's bronze statue...* 1894.

23 *Art Pays Homage to Columbus...* 1894, p. 6.

24 This is the description of the portrait, displayed in Gallery 625, on the Met's website: "Whether this portrait actually depicts Christopher Columbus is debatable, but from the time it was first engraved around 1590 it became the authoritative likeness of the explorer who launched the Spanish crown's violent colonization of the Americas. Columbus's four voyages between 1492 and 1504 literally began to map a project of extracting human and natural resources that ensured the dominance of Spain and Catholicism on a global scale for over two centuries. The date of 1519 on this badly damaged portrait indicates that, if it represents Columbus, it was painted posthumously. An explanation may come, however, from the visit of Columbus's son to Rome in 1516–17, where the highly regarded artist Sebastiano del Piombo would have been an appropriate choice to memorialize his father." <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437645>.

25 Roosevelt 1934.

26 The Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the separation of pupils in public schools because of race. With this case racial segregation in U.S. schools legally ended, therefore overruling the "separate but equal" principle of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case.

27 In 1974 the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), representing about a hundred Indigenous tribes, was founded in South Dakota. In 1977 it was the first Indigenous organization to be granted Consultative Status by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

28 Cobo 1987.

29 Goodrich 1874: see in particular p. 321, the heading for which is "Cruelty of Columbus."

30 Morison 1942, p. 493.

31 Zinn 2010, p. 7.

32 Sale 1990, pp. 361–62.

33 On June 17, 2015, a twenty-one-year-old white supremacist killed nine African American people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, an African American man, was killed in Minneapolis by a white police officer who pressed his knee on Floyd's neck for over nine minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and face down on the road.

34 Statues and monuments honoring historical figures like Cecil Rhodes in South Africa or Sir John Cass in the UK were targeted, to mention just a couple.

35 *Report to the City of New York* 2018: pp. 29–30.

36 Cherone 2023.

37 Leblanc 2023.

38 O'Driscoll 2023.

39 Capps 2021.

40 Trump also moved to establish the National Garden of American Heroes, a sculpture garden honoring "great figures of America's history," a project that was never realized.

41 *A Proclamation on...* 2021: White House, *A Proclamation on Indigenous Peoples' Day*, 2021, Briefing Room; Presidential Actions, October 8, 2021.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/10/08/a-proclamation-indigenous-peoples-day-2021/#:~:text=On%20Indigenous%20Peoples'%20Day%2C%20our,treaty%20>

obligations%20to%20Tribal%20Nations.

42 *Legal Experts Say...* 2019.

43 Lee 2023.

44 Presidential Initiatives, “The Monuments Project,” Mellon Foundation, <https://www.mellon.org/article/the-monuments-project-initiative>.

45 Presidential Initiatives, “The Monuments Project,” Mellon Foundation, <https://www.mellon.org/article/the-monuments-project-initiative>.

46 Bishara 2020.

47 In 2020 Colorado even passed a law replacing Columbus Day with Cabrini Day. Proponents of the bill thought that Columbus does not represent members of their community unlike Frances Xavier Cabrini, the Italian woman responsible for establishing schools, hospitals and orphanages in the United States and South and Central America. Mother Cabrini, crucial figure of aid and assistance for Italian immigrants, arrived in the United States in 1889 and died in 1917. See Ebrahimji 2020.

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