Humanizing the Seas
A Case for Integrating the Arts and Humanities into Ocean Literacy and Stewardship

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Plastic Catch · Susan Schultz  
porcelain and wood sculpture
The Gargantuan Arm

Let us remember liberty was not popular, seven years it took Laboulaye to convince Bartholdi a gigantic statue was what New York Harbor needed. Ten years later the Frenchman arrived in Philadelphia with her gargantuan arm. Thirty feet high, nearly two tons of torch. Displayed at the peak of America’s backward slide into Emancipation, it looks now like a statue sunk in sand. So were its finances. The same month Jo Reed was dragged from his cell in Nashville, Tennessee, and hung from a suspension bridge by an angry mob. “Hardly had Reed been lodged in jail than the subject of lynching him had become general conversation,” the Memphis Daily Appeal reported.

Their fund-raising tour in Philadelphia complete, Bartholdi and crew dismantled the appendage, packed it into crates, and loaded her on a train to New York City. For five years the arm sat in Madison Square Park as Harper’s railed against Americans having to pay for its pedestal. Raising pennies. Coins. You could climb up inside of Liberty, it was grand, a view. But the person taking your ticket couldn’t. People loved it. Workers on the project back in France got married, had children, died. Kipling came to Paris in 1878 when Bartholdi showed the head and was told he’d peered through the eyes of Liberty herself. That same month Michael Green was dragged from his cell in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, a noose thrown round his neck, and his body raised fifteen feet from the ground. Left there until the following morning.
In May of 1884, an American businessman in Paris hosted an opulent banquet in Bartholdi’s honor, all of Parisian society there in clothes pressed and washed by others. Black servants moving through the room swiftly. Did any of the guests regard the arms that swept over their heads to whisk away the china and cutlery before a new course arrived? Did they marvel at the strength of a human-sized arm that can carry a tray weighing thirty or forty pounds and remain unseen? Not spill a drop of wine or sweat. And did any of the men waiting that night pause for a cigarette, or stand outside looking in at the glass banquet hall, with its crystal chandelier and its small-scale model of Liberty, and know it was not for him?


**JOHN FREEMAN** is the editor of *Freeman’s*, a literary annual which features new writing by Louise Erdrich, Olga Tokarczuk, Robin Coste Lewis and Haruki Murakami, among others. He has written three books of nonfiction, *The Tyranny of Email*, *How to Read a Novelist*, and *Dictionary of the Undoing*, as well as two collections of poems, *Maps* and *The Park*, both published by Copper Canyon. A child of California public schools, he lives today in New York City, where he is artist-in-residence at NYU and executive editor of The Literary Hub. Between 2014 and 2020, he edited a series of anthologies on inequality, concluding this year *Tales of Two Planets*, which focuses on the collision of the climate crisis and global inequality. Freeman’s work has been translated into more than 20 languages.