

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Liberty Deeply Ingrained in Recently Acquired NMAJH Sculptures Depicting Immigrant Experience

By **Rachel Kurland** - August 9, 2017



Phillip Ratner created a new sculpture this year of Emma Lazarus, which was donated by Barbara and Dennis Davison and now housed in the National Museum of American Jewish History. | Photo provided by the National Museum of American Jewish History

If you visit the Statue of Liberty, you'll find Phillip Ratner's grandparents — not as tourists, but as permanent sculptures representing immigrants who came through Ellis Island.

Now in the heart of where that history began, Ratner's works are taking up residence in the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH).

A graduate of the Pratt Institute in New York and a longtime art teacher in the Washington, D.C., area, Ratner began the project in 1979 surrounding the immigrant story of coming to America.

Working with historians and searching through old photographs, he sculpted more than 40 metal pieces illustrating scenes from the Lower East Side, all still located on the third floor of the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York.

Outside the museum are eight almost-lifesize bronze figures of "how people came to America," depicting the different types of people who immigrated.

"There's a man and a boy. There's a woman alone. There's an old couple. There's a bunch of kids on a trunk," he said. "The characters are there, and you form your own [opinion]."

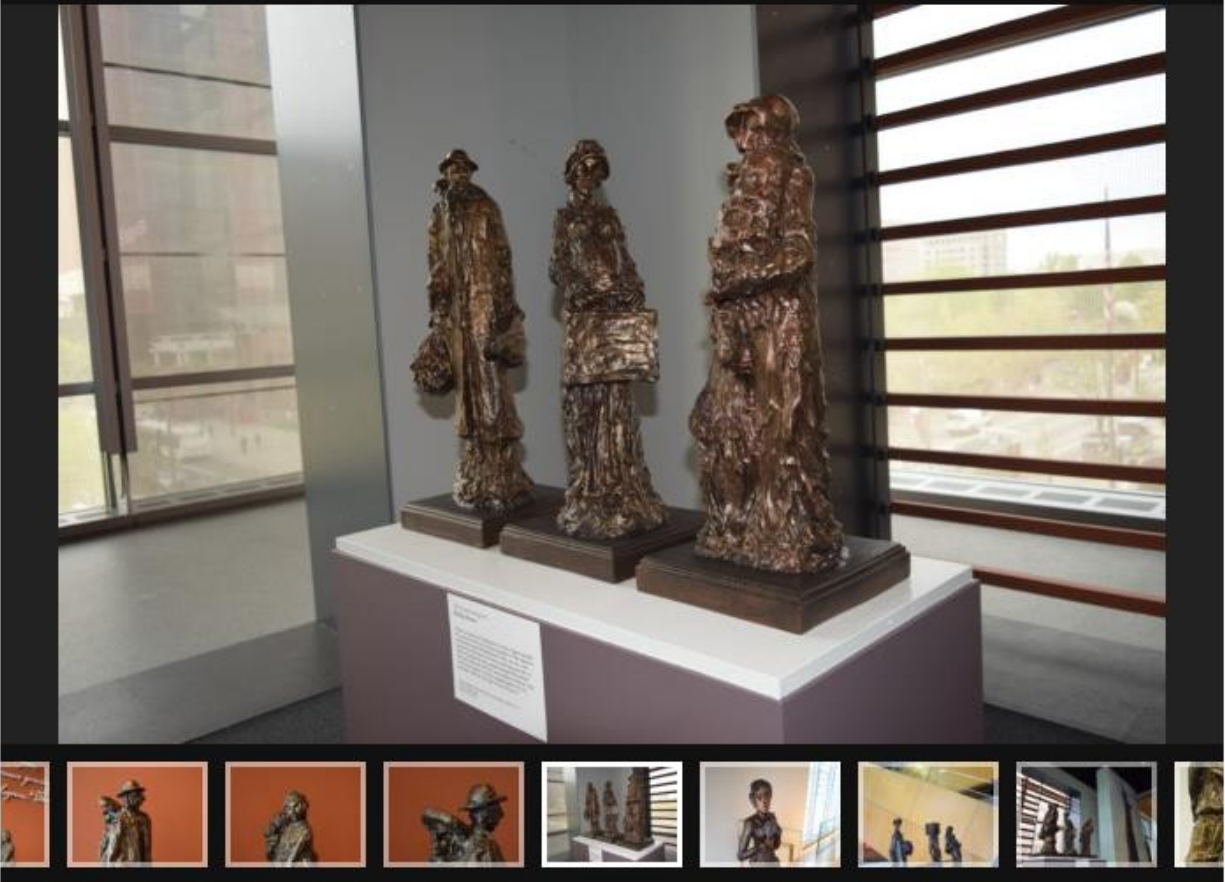
Additionally, he created five full-length sculptures of historic figures that incorporate the Statue of Liberty, both in an artistic and literal manner.

The five bronze statues, each about 4 feet high, include French sculptor Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, who designed the Statue of Liberty; Joseph Pulitzer, who raised money for Lady Liberty's base; Gustave Eiffel of Eiffel Tower notoriety; Emma Lazarus, whose sonnet "The New Colossus" appears on the statue's pedestal; and Édouard René de Laboulaye, a French official who conceived the idea for the monument.

"I had smaller versions that I made to review" the features, Ratner noted. His self-taught sculpting style follows the patterns of Renoir's paintings: "They're people; the detail is there, but no eyebrows, no eyelashes, no little hairs on their beards."

By doing so, individual details blur, allowing the sculptures to represent a variety of nationalities.

He molded the original statues in case additional castings were ever to make an appearance elsewhere — like the NMAJH.



A friend connected him to the NMAJH, and he donated 10 24-inch castings to the museum, which are permanently on display on the first and third floors in the series Ellis Island Immigrants.

A Washington, D.C., native, Ratner asked his friend where the NMAJH is located in Philadelphia. Ratner is used to housing his pieces among many national institutions, so when he discovered the NMAJH overlooks Independence Mall, "I said, 'I like that,'" he laughed.

Those castings were made with actual metal from the interior of Lady Liberty herself, which were removed after restorations. The metal was crushed into a powder and Ratner mixed it with resin.

He also made a new, slightly different Emma Lazarus statue this year to accompany the others at the NMAJH. But unlike the others, it was hand-built, though it blends in as it's

coated with a bronze patina.

This statue accompanies the museum's collection on the poet.

The NMAJH was also recently awarded a \$250,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for its upcoming exhibit Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music, which opens March 2018.

The exhibition takes place during the centennial of the influential composer and features more than 100 historic artifacts, sound installations and interactive media displays — including Bernstein's piano, personal Judaica and a composing easel — exploring the West Side Story composer's life and social activism.

This grant is in addition to the one the museum received in April 2016 from NEH for the early planning phases of the exhibit, totaling \$40,000.

Ratner donated the immigrant exhibit, for which his inspiration stems from his family's own immigration story.

Ratner was fortunate to grow up with all four of his grandparents well into his late 30s.

He took the time to ask them about their lives and how they grew up.

Both sets of grandparents came from Ukraine. One grandfather, who carried his violin throughout his travels, later became a founding member of the National Symphony Orchestra alongside his brother.

He's since sculpted a piece located at the Statue of Liberty of a woman and a man, carrying a violin case — a tribute to his grandparents.

"There's a human, personal part," he said. "I bet thousands of people came in with violins and guitars, or some kind of musical instrument, but there's my grandmother and grandfather in front of the Statue of Liberty forever."

Other pieces of Ratner's work also span the walls of the Smithsonian Institution, the Supreme Court of the United States, the Library of Congress, several universities including Rutgers and Brandeis, and abroad in Israel and the Vatican, not to mention The Ratner Museum of many of his works in Bethesda, Md.

Now 80 years old, Ratner has continued that tradition with his own nine grandchildren, encouraging them to ask him questions.

With immigration a hot-button topic, his pieces still resonate today, and the sculptures themselves obviously have not changed, similar to Ratner.

"I still have all my hair. I still weigh 145 pounds. I may be a little shorter than 5-foot-7," he laughed. "And I'm doing exactly what I love."

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