

# All Things Greek

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Special to The National Herald

How far would you go to support Hellenism? It takes far less of an effort than you might first imagine. It can involve you in American as well as Greek history and culture. The ways in which one can promote and sustain Hellenism in the U.S. is not always complicated and sometimes quite rewarding.

Let me cite but one example. Several weeks ago I went with my friend and fellow Greek American Studies colleague Dan Georgakas to the Newark Art Museum. Driving from Union City New Jersey we arrived in Newark in well under an hour. We went to see Hiram Powers's statue "The Greek Slave." This statue, which is one of the Newark Museum's most valued treasures, was carved in 1847. The statue we saw, and that you too can go and visit, was gifted to the Museum by Franklin Murphy Jr. in 1926.

Just 5 feet 6 inches tall this one statue changed forever how American sculptures understood their art. An immediate sensation, The Greek Slave was the first work of sculpture by an American artist to gain international recognition. But it would never have been carved if not for the suffering of a real life Greek maiden.

In 1821 when the Greeks rose once again to free themselves from the rule of the Ottoman Turks, their battle cry was literally heard around the world. The response was so intense and consuming it was called the Grecian Fever. Newspapers and circulars from around the world presented every aspect of the war to their eager readers. Philhellenes from a host of nations came to fight alongside the embattled Greeks. Greek relief committees also were formed. In the course of the eight-year war

## *The story of an important sculpture*

refugees and orphans made their way to American shores. One such person was a young Greek maiden who had literally been bought off the Turkish slave block and brought to America. The story of her experiences ran in Boston newspapers and traveled across the nation. It was her story that eventually led to Powers's statue.

Powers was born in 1805 in Woodstock, Vermont and died in Florence, Italy in 1873. He was part of the American community in Italy. Classical Greek and Roman statues while much praised by intellectuals were deemed too indecent (read: too naked) for the general public of the 1800s. A private American collector purchased The Greek Slave from Powers and asked that it be shipped to his home in New Orleans.

Powers called on his friend Miner Kellogg to see that the statue traveled safely and reached its owner. But then the unexpected happened. Once in the U.S. Kellogg first showed the statue to friends. Their response was such that a limited showing of the statue was held. Given the acclaim this statue provoked, Kellogg arranged for a tour of the statue as he traveled his way down to New Orleans from New York City. During this 1847-1848 tour over 100,000 people paid to see the statue.

But how was a naked statue allowed to be publicly viewed in America during this era? Because it was a naked statue clothed in, what was then called, a sentiment. This sentiment being the story of the real-life Greek woman who was brought to the U.S. in the late 1820s. As Powers himself wrote: "The Slave has been taken from one of the Greek Islands by the Turks, in the time of the Greek Revolution, the history of which

is familiar to all. Her father and mother, and perhaps all her kindred, have been destroyed by her foes, and she alone preserved as a treasure too valuable to be thrown away. She is now among barbarian strangers, under pressure of a full recollection of the calamitous events which have brought her to her present state, and she awaits her fate with intense anxiety, tempered indeed by the support of her reliance upon the goodness of God. Gather all these afflictions together, and add to them the fortitude and resignation of a Christian, and no room will be left for shame."

While Powers conflated the story of the Greek maiden who arrived in Boston with the Massacre of Chios, it is still a 'story' every American of that era knew well.

This is all very interesting but what does my visit to this one statue have to do with you and Hellenism? Modern life is hard. Maybe not always in physical labor, as it was for our grandparents and parents, but still draining. So who has the time to travel long distances to see one statue? Greek art or, as in the case of The Greek Slave, American art about what non-Greeks thought was Greek is to be found all around the country. In small towns as well as major urban centers.

Being Greek in North America isn't easy. It is no longer simply about meeting other Greeks at church or socially during the week. We must actively support the best of Hellenism that is all around us.

And who better to educate about the true nature of Greek history in North America than our neighbors and friends? If we can not impart to these people why Hellenism remains important then how can we say it is really important in our own lives?

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