

◀ Tomb of Francis II, Duke of Brittany, Cathedral of St. Peter, Nantes, France. Sculpted by Michel Colombe

## The virtues that lead to freedom, personified

# The Faces of Freedom

Lanta Davis

**L**ADY LIBERTY IS, for many Americans, the face of freedom. We recognize her face and her crown, and the inspiring way she holds up her torch. But for much of recorded Western history, freedom had a different face—four, in fact. And they pointed the way toward a freedom from the most oppressive tyrant of all: ourselves.

From at least as early as ancient Greece, the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance have been seen as the path to freedom. While we may define freedom today as the freedom to do what we want, traditional definitions of freedom link it to liberation from sin (or self-destruction) and to the development of a noble, generous character. Virtue frees us to do what is best for us by breaking the shackles we put on ourselves. If I lack courage to pursue the kind of work I love because the path to it is difficult, I have sabotaged myself. If I lack the prudence to make a good decision today, I may ruin my tomorrow.

Becoming free from the self is no easy feat. It requires inspiration—a vision to follow, and models to emulate. The cardinal virtues teach us the art of life, and teaching us the art of becoming virtuous has historically required *art*.

Just as children tend to imitate the things they see their parents doing, so too do we imitate what we see. We become what we behold. The word for character reveals this relationship. Character comes from the Greek *kharakter*, the name for a coin-stamping tool that impresses a specific image onto the metal. Ancient and medieval thinkers imagined the memory as a kind of wax. Molten metal and wax are shaped by whatever image is stamped upon them, and so too, they believed, is our character shaped by the images imprinted upon us.



N° 1244 Nantes. Cathédrale, tombeau de François II.

When Americans think about what it means to be American, then, they likely think of images and stories: from Mount Rushmore to the Capitol, from Abraham Lincoln to Frederick Douglass, from the stars and stripes to Uncle Sam. That's why so many Americans associate freedom with Lady Liberty's upraised torch and proud stance. The statue offers a shared vision, something to aspire to and rally around.

Freedom from the tyranny of the self also required images to aspire to and rally around. Seeing the art of virtues was an important part of learning the art of virtue. A virtue should not only be contemplated, but embodied. Consequently, artists from antiquity to the early modern period transformed a virtue from an idea into a person.

Personifications of the virtues traditionally played an essential part of virtue formation. Wisdom as an idea, a concept, can feel abstract and therefore difficult to grasp. But gazing at Wisdom's face—seeing wisdom with one's own eyes—makes the virtue suddenly accessible. We can better imitate what we see.

Personifications also helped with the basics of virtue education. Each virtue not only had a body and a face, but distinct "accessories." Lady Prudence carries different items with her than Lady Courage. Rather than rely on rote memorization to remember the key parts of a virtue, these symbolic items interpreted the virtue and acted as a memory aid.

The Lady Virtues are woven into tapestries, featured in frescoes, carved into church doors, and etched into stained glass. They show up in hundreds of places and possess hundreds of faces, but remarkably for an artform that spanned over a millennium, the basic features of the cardinal virtues stayed fairly consistent whether they were crafted by an ancient Roman sculptor, a medieval monk, or a Renaissance painter.



Tomb of Francis II, Duke of Brittany. The prominent statue is of Lady Justice. Photograph by Jordiferrer

One of the most compelling of the artistic works of the cardinal virtues—and a set that especially emphasizes that the virtues are a kind of freedom from the self—are four sculptures by Michel Colombe that adorn the corners of Francis II, the Duke of Brittany's tomb. Though depictions of

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the virtues can vary, these four sculptures offer a sense for how art of the virtues once acted as a foundation for the art of a virtuous life.

Lady Prudence hardly goes anywhere without her mirror and pet snake. Prudence, which means practical wisdom, begins with "knowing thyself," or gazing into the mirror of self-reflection. Prudence also requires that we be as "cunning as serpents" (from the Gospel of Matthew

10:16), so that we can creatively find an option "c" when plans "a" and "b" go awry. Lady Prudence shows her own capacity for surprise: where Prudence's hair should be, the long beard of her second face, Old Man Memory's, flows down her back instead. Old Man Memory reminds all who gaze at him that prudence need not only learn from

one's own experiences, but those of others, too. Studying history and the collective wisdom of the past means that we can see with thousands of eyes,

rather than just our own. When making a decision, we can confer with the counsel of the ages. Becoming wise relies in large part upon consulting the wisdom of others.

Lady Justice is the best known of the cardinal virtues today, for she often oversees our courthouses. Civic justice, however, is quite different from the cardinal virtue of justice. For one, Lady Justice is not blindfolded.

She must see

clearly so that she can keep her scales balanced. Justice is about giving proper due. In civic justice, we may commonly expect justice to restore the balance by finding the proper punishment to fit the crime, but the cardinal virtue is more about developing gratitude and right relationships. Worship, for instance, is part of justice, because worship is a way



Tomb of Francis II, Duke of Brittany. The prominent statue is of Lady Prudence. Photograph by Jordiferrer

*The virtues are consistent but adaptable.*

to try to give to God what God is due. But Lady Justice still carries a sword, meaning there remains an element of revenge, retribution, and punishment.

Her sword is sheathed, however, and it evokes the sword of Solomon, a ruler who wielded the sword but did not use it. A truly just ruler is also a prudent ruler, meaning that the sword is not the means toward justice, but a last resort.

Colombe's Lady Courage fiercely grips a dragon and pulls it out of a cracked castle.

Courage enables us to face the monsters of evil. We might equate courage with heroics, the brave acts of a warrior. Indeed, Lady Courage is a freedom fighter. But the monster she battles is the monster within. Castles are often a symbol of the soul, and here, Colombe depicts courage as a willingness to face the evil within, to pull out by the tail the monster lurking in the soul.



Tomb of Francis II, Duke of Brittany. The prominent statue is of Lady Temperance. Photograph by Jordiferrer

Facing the monster within is no easy task, and so Lady Courage shows up for battle, bedecked in armor and ready to persevere through whatever trials await. Lady

Courage knows she cannot face those trials by her own strength, however, and thus leans back, showing her reliance on God to help her stay the course.

Lady Temperance, too, reminds us of the risk of becoming enslaved to the self. She holds a clock and a bridle. The clock reminds us that there is a time and season for everything, that temperance is a matter

of measure and timing. Her bridle

suggests that temperance is a form of training. Our passions, or appetites, such as our desire for food, sex, and money, are often compared to a horse in ancient and medieval tradition. The passions can help us get to where we want to go if they are restrained and controlled, but if they are not, they are like a wild stallion careening off the path and carrying us away with

them. Letting the passions run wild inevitably becomes self-destructive, but a bridle helps rein them in, training the passions to get us where we want to go. Restraint, Colombe's Lady Temperance says, may look confining, but it is actually the key to freedom.

Colombe's sculptures of the cardinal virtues are but one example of a very rich tradition. That personifications of the virtues are consistent yet different speaks to the very nature of virtue formation, in that the virtues do not look the same in every person. The virtues are consistent but adaptable. What is temperate for me may not be temperate for someone else. Temperance itself is a shared vision, but the exercise of the virtue must be tailored to the individual. The art of virtues reminds

us that the art of becoming virtuous is less about rigid rules that look the same for everyone, but are indeed more like an art: there are specific forms and boundaries, but a great deal of creativity within those forms.

The consistent yet creative vision of the moral life present in the personifications challenges the either/

or, black-and-white dichotomies so prevalent in our world. Legalism—whether it's the legalism of a religious rulebook or our divisive, culture-war politics—leaves no room for nuance. It is black, or it is white. But personifications of the virtues replace a morality written on a list with one that is inscribed upon a body. Personifications of the virtues like those of Colombe remind those

who gaze upon their faces that virtue is meant not only to be known, but to be lived. As such, they teach that moral choices can never fit into a neat package, because they are made by living, breathing beings who often face difficult choices and possess conflicting motives—even when they are ultimately trying to seek what is good.

While the ancients had their

own Lady Liberty, their own rallying symbols of their country, they also knew that true freedom cannot be found by winning wars or political battles. Lasting freedom is not about picking a side or living in a particular country. The freedom the cardinal virtues offer is a way to live more beautifully, to make one's life into an artistic masterpiece. ♦



Tomb of Francis II, Duke of Brittany. The prominent statue is of Lady Courage. Photograph by Jordiferrer