

Columbia

ALLEGORY OF AMERICA
BY JULIA CHEN

Before there was Lady Liberty and Uncle Sam, Columbia

hailed as one of the earliest personifications of the United States. While she has lent her name to dozens of rivers, cities, and universities, such as the District of Columbia, Columbia University, and the Columbia River, she remains largely overlooked in the history of America's allegories.

Columbia was strong and beautiful, modeled after Greek mythology and infused with a unique sense of Americanism. She remains a central figure in the narrative of how early Americans saw the nation, its values, and its full potential. While Lady Liberty has come to symbolize justice, openness to immigrants, and the hope of an established American dream, Columbia's reputation was ever-evolving, alongside America's growth. Columbia was at times audacious, representing the pursuit of freedom, and alongside it, war and the desire for territorial expansion.

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THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA
Theodor Galle, replica after Johannes Stradanus, Ca. 1600

She also conveyed a sense of purity and newness, often accompanied by a heavenly, if not directly religious, connotation.

The timeline of Columbia's identity follows the timeline of the United States as it came into its own power. Columbia, of course, comes from Christopher Columbus. The name Columbia used to describe the United States dates back to 1738, when it used in the British Gentleman's Magazine.¹

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However, she was not the earliest allegory of America. Before Columbia, there were European artistic depictions of America.

Illustrations of Early America

In Theodor Galle's portrayal (above), Amerigo Vespucci encounters a sleeping America.² This is the first plate from a series entitled "Nova Reperta" or "New Inventions of Modern Times," which celebrated the discovery of America and other new wonders. America is presumably a native woman, and in the background, a group of native people can be seen roasting a human leg. While the land seems lush and full of activity and life, the contrast between the fully-dressed Italian explorer and the depiction of the native people reveals an ignorance about the new land and the people there. The overt suggestion at the native people's savagery, and the potential dangers of the new world, is a direct contrast to Vespucci's compass and ship, a technological advancement of the time. Furthermore, America's nakedness and position, as she gets up from lying down on



ALLEGORY OF AMERICA
Nicolaes Berchem, Mid-late 17th century

the hammock, reveal her to be more vulnerable in this exchange.

Nicolaes Berchem's portrayal of America also depicts America as a native woman.³ Berchem was a popular painter known mostly for his landscapes done in an Italian style; he was considered a great naturalist painter of the Dutch Golden Age.⁴ He was a prolific artist and influenced media heavily. His depiction of America became the standard allegory for America: "It was all there: the alluring figure of 'America' herself, decked out in a dainty feathered skirt and colorful feathered headdress; the pearls, faintly visible around her

neck, demonstrating the region's endemic richness; the classic bow and arrow...alluding to her habit of hunting...the mounds of freshly mined gold (or perhaps silver) piling up at her feet, alongside stacks of ingots, which indicate the substantial mineral wealth of the continent."⁵

Interestingly, the Berchem version of America was also repurposed for depictions of Africa and India, revealing "the flexible presentation and loose understanding of exotic space and geographic meaning."⁶

While the personification of land as female was not a new concept, the depiction of America as a native,

scantily-dressed, and often vulnerable woman demonstrates the sentiment of European sophistication and superiority over the newly discovered lands.

Origins of Columbia

In the late 18th century, the name Columbia was going around in English publications in reference to America. It was first used in *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1738. The British magazine was a digest of news and commentary about a range of topics and included the publication of the debates of Parliament. Since publication of parliamentary debates was illegal, the magazine published them under the title "Debates in the Senate of Magna Lilliputia," adopting Jonathon Swift's fictitious name for Great Britain. In the Debates, America became coined as Columbia: "It is observable, that their Conquests and the Acquisitions in Columbia (which is the Lilliputian Name fort the Country that answers our America,)..."⁷

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To His Excellency George Washington

Celestial choir! enthron'd in realms of light,
Columbia's scenes of glorious toils I write.
While freedom's cause her anxious breast alarms,
She flashes dreadful in refulgent arms.
See mother earth her offspring's fate bemoan,
And nations gaze at scenes before unknown!
See the bright beams of heaven's revolving light
Involved in sorrows and the veil of night!

The Goddess comes, she moves divinely fair,
Olive and laurel binds Her golden hair:
Wherever shines this native of the skies,
Unnumber'd charms and recent graces rise.

Muse! Bow propitious while my pen relates
How pour her armies through a thousand gates,
As when Eolus heaven's fair face deforms,
Enwrapp'd in tempest and a night of storms;
Astonish'd ocean feels the wild uproar,
The reflux surges beat the sounding shore;
Or think as leaves in Autumn's golden reign,
Such, and so many, moves the warrior's train.
In bright array they seek the work of war,

Where high unfurl'd the ensign waves in air.
Shall I to Washington their praise recite?
Enough thou know'st them in the fields of fight.
Thee, first in peace and honors—we demand
The grace and glory of thy martial band.
Fam'd for thy valour, for thy virtues more,
Hear every tongue thy guardian aid implore!

One century scarce perform'd its destined round,
When Gallic powers Columbia's fury found;
And so may you, whoever dares disgrace
The land of freedom's heaven-defended race!
Fix'd are the eyes of nations on the scales,
For in their hopes Columbia's arm prevails.
Anon Britannia droops the pensive head,
While round increase the rising hills of dead.
Ah! Cruel blindness to Columbia's state!
Lament thy thirst of boundless power too late.

Proceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side,
Thy ev'ry action let the Goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! Be thine.

Phillis Wheatley, 1776

Across the Atlantic in 1776, Phillis Wheatley, an African-American poet and slave, became the first person to use the term *Columbia* poetically (above).

In her poem "To His Excellency George Washington," Wheatley combines two mythical figures, Phoebus Apollo and Athene, also known as Minerva, to create her *Columbia*. *Columbia's* "golden hair" is from Apollo, while Minerva gives way to *Columbia's* femininity and association with war. However, Wheatley's *Columbia* is also Christianized. Steele argued that Wheatley's personification of *Columbia* combined her identity and George Washington's:

"Wheatley created the personification both from Apollo – the god of poetry and poets and thus the representation of the poetess herself in masculine embodiment – and from Athene – the goddess of strategy and generals and thus a representation of Washington in a feminine embodiment."⁸

The fact that it was Wheatley who was able to celebrate America as a majestic and brave female figure also reveals how the notion of *Columbia* had taken on a sense of freedom, or perhaps more accurately, a promise of freedom, that was distinctly American. Despite being a woman, a slave, and African-American, Wheatley is not only able to create this poetical image of the nation but to also popularize it in public

discourse. Wheatley stands in stark contrast to the white, mostly European and all free, men who had previously contributed to discussions of America. In taking ownership of *Columbia*, Wheatley also elevated *Columbia's* status to beyond a mere pseudonym; *Columbia* was now a goddess, full of grace and divine strength, ready to fight against the overreach of power.

Images of *Columbia* as described by Wheatley started to emerge in the 19th century. John Gast's painting (top right) shows *Columbia* guiding settlers west, bringing light and utilizing modern technology.⁹ She embodies America's manifest

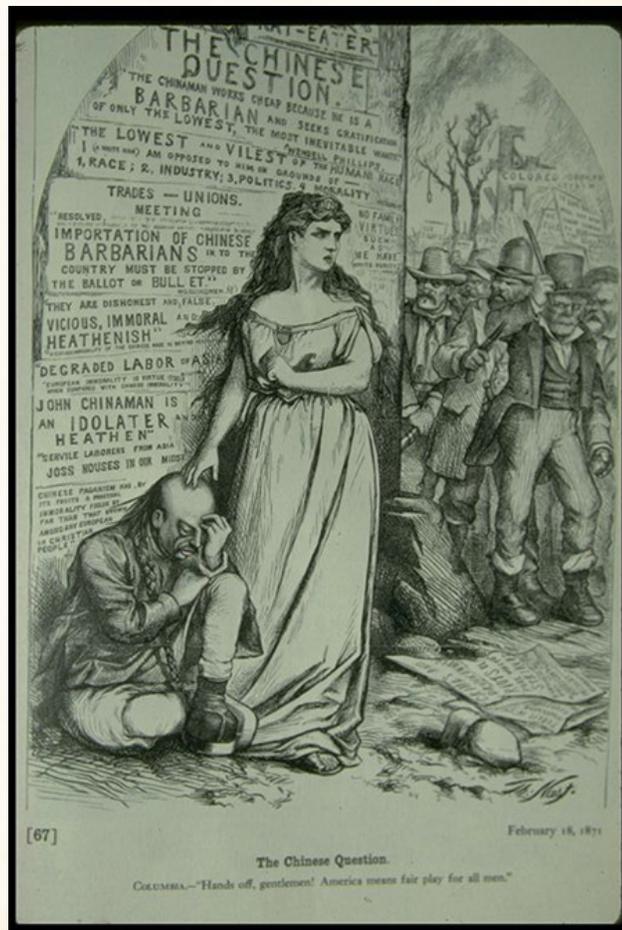
destiny, while still portraying characteristics of femininity and purity. Gast's painting was originally created for George Croffutt, who published popular travel guides for the west. In *Croffutt's New Overland Tourist and Pacific Coast Guide*, Croffutt explains the image, writing that it "represents the United States' portion of the American Continent; the beauty and variety, from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, illustrating at a glance the grand drama of Progress in the civilization, settlement, and history of this country." Columbia "carries a book – common school – the emblem of education and the testimonial of our national enlightenment, while with the left hand she unfold and stretches the slender wires of the telegraph, that are to flash intelligence throughout the land."¹⁰

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Columbia could also be seen standing up for the rights of disadvantaged groups. She stands up for Chinese immigrants in 1871 (bottom right). The caption reads "Columbia – 'Hands off, gentlemen! America means fair play for all men.'"¹¹



SPIRIT OF THE FRONTIER
John GAST, 1872



THE CHINESE QUESTION
February 18, 1871

The Chinese question refers to the influx of Chinese immigrants after the Gold Rush of 1849 in California. By 1852, 30,000 Chinese immigrants arrived in San Francisco, and there was much uncertainty about how they fitted into national politics and society.¹² The immigrants were mostly male laborers looking for economic opportunity. The Burlingame Treaty of 1868 facilitated the migration of Chinese workers for the construction of the Pacific Railroad with prepaid contracts that provided for the passage in exchange for three-five years of work. Tens of thousands of men signed these types of contracts.¹³ The Burlingame Treaty was by no means an encouragement of Chinese immigration; the Chinese were expected to return back to China after their contracts expired. Neither the U.S. nor China wanted permanent Chinese migration, and the Chinese government had agreed to prohibit it in 1858 in Treaty of Tientsin. In 1882, the United States passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned all Chinese laborers from entering the country and denied Chinese immigrants the right to naturalize. It was the first large-scale restriction on immigration, and it was the first time that the government barred immigration solely based on race and class.¹⁴

In 1881, Columbia welcomes German immigrants:¹⁵ (top right)



Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, January 22, 1881.
The caption reads: "Columbia welcomes the victims of German Persecution to "The Anthem of the Oppressed."

The U.S. also witnessed a large flood of immigration from Europe in the mid-19th century. In the 1820s, there was less than 150,000 immigrants living in the U.S.; that number grew to over 2.5 million in the 1850s.¹⁶ The majority of immigrants were from Ireland and Germany. Although they did not face the same tone of racism and exclusion the Chinese did, they nevertheless suffered from discrimination. Irish and German immigrants were viewed as different from Americans largely due to their Catholicism. Not only was the U.S. founded on Protestant ideals, but this wave of immigration also coincided with a burst of Protestant evangelism.¹⁷

In the image above, Columbia closely resembles Minerva, one of Wheatley's inspirations for the American figure. Minerva was the goddess of wisdom, trade, arts, and later became associated with war.

Having a Minerva-like figure stand up for immigration adds an additional political tone to the image, suggesting that more open immigration policy is a wise course of action, and perhaps even one that would enrich the country's economy and culture.

This also demonstrates the flexibility of Columbia's image; she could be celestial, donned in a white gown and surrounded by a heavenly light, she could be more free and wild with her hair flowing, and she could be more orderly in formal dress and her hair neatly tied up. Without a fixed and established portrayal in media, Columbia was adaptable for artists to use and insert their own messages.

Cont: Columbia in the 20th Century

Into the 20th Century

At the turn of the century, in 1893, Chicago hosted the World's Columbian Exposition, also known as Chicago's World Fair. The fair was held to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Columbus reaching America. It was also a showcase for Chicago, which won the right to host the fair over New York City and had just rebuilt its city after the Great Chicago Fire. Over 26 million visitors came to the fair to see the latest technological advancements of the time, as well as art and entertainment.¹⁸ The great feats on display included the ferris wheel and the exhibits in the Electricity Building, including electric moving sidewalks, elevators, and the telephone.¹⁹ In a 1893 guide to the fair, the Electricity Building is described with extreme praise: "The Electrical Department of the Columbian Exposition will be a revelation to even those who attribute almost miraculous powers to the great force. A hundred thousand incandescent lamps placed harmoniously about the grounds and buildings, and 10,000 arc lamps distributed advantageously to light up the beautiful architecture and pleasing landscape, would alone furnish almost a fairy spectacle; but combine with these, electric fountains, pointing rainbow sprays towards the sky, glittering lamps of many colors sparkling under the clear waters of the lagoons and at night setting out in all their dainty colorings the floral beauties and the most brilliant kaleidoscope will fade in an every-day dull contrast."²⁰



LOOKING WEST FROM PERISTYLE.

COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION 1893
Wikicommons

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In addition to lending her name to the fair, Columbia, or at least a figure that highly resembled her, also oversaw the fair. A sixty-five-foot tall Statue of the Republic made by Daniel Chester French became one of the most iconic images of the fair and was one of the country's tallest statues of the time. The original statue was destroyed by a fire shortly after the fair, but another version was created in 1918.²¹ The allegory of America – whatever her name – overlooking one of the most monumental and advanced showcases of the time shows how far America has come from Galle's portrayal of a naked, sleeping America in "New Inventions of Modern Times."²²



BE PATRIOTIC
Paul Stahr, 1917-18

Images of Columbia continued to appear well into the 20th century. True to Columbia's roots from Minerva, she was often used in posters for patriotism and war.

However, a threatening force was working against Columbia: Uncle Sam. Uncle Sam was coming to life in political cartoons in the early 1870s. He became a central figure to World War I, as displayed in the famous "I Want You" poster.²³ Furthermore, with the construction of the Statue of Liberty in 1886, Lady Liberty soon became the more well-known female personification of America. The flexibility of Columbia's image that inspired the rich throng of varied illustrations may have ultimately failed to cement Columbia as an enduring icon.

While Columbia remains largely absent from contemporary representations of America,



COLUMBIA CALLS
Vincent Aderente, 1916

we may still remember her fondly whenever we visit the nation's capital, and every time we watch a movie from Sony/Columbia Pictures.

By JULIA CHEN

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