Crowned with a diadem emblazoned with thirteen stars representative of the original states in the union, *America* is derived from a full-length statue Hiram Powers executed as a memorial to the 1848 revolutions in Europe and a celebration of democratic values embodied by the United States government. In 1848 Powers explicated the theme to his Cincinnati patron Nicholas Longworth, “I am making a statue to suit the times, at least it ought to suit the times if Liberty is to triumph.... I wish her to say that where crowns are exalted I cannot abide, and if you would have me live with you, and you would enjoy the blessings which I can give, you must be united and you must trample in the dust, every semblance of despotism.” Originally titled “Liberty,” Powers altered the title to reflect more specifically the virtues of his home country; this shift in title was symptomatic of the sculptor’s nationalistic desire to reflect upon the United States’ role as a model for burgeoning democratic states and gain a coveted government commission -- the one honor that had eluded Powers for many years.

Living in Florence, Italy, Powers witnessed firsthand his adopted country’s struggles for unification under the leadership of Garibaldi, participated in peaceful demonstrations, and was part of an
international community concerned with the establishment of democratic nations in Europe. Support for the 1848 uprisings in France, Italy, Germany and other European nations was overwhelmingly positive in the United States for both political and economic reasons. To the citizens of a country founded upon the principles of liberty and equality for all, the tyranny of kings was reprehensible. On a more pragmatic note, favorable trade treaties were expected to result from the initiation of republican leadership in these countries. One statement among many, Powers’ sculpture was unique in that it bridged a gap between Italy and the United States, the two cultures to which the sculptor felt patriotic allegiance and was therefore a personal as well as a political statement.

Begun in 1848, the full-sized marble version of America was not completed until 1858. A partially nude figure draped around the hips with her left arm raised, America takes her pose from the ancient Greek sculpture Venus de Milo. Symbolic attributes of Powers’ figure include a laurel wreath and a diadem; she stands on broken chains. Congress passed a resolution in 1855 to commission a work by Powers for the Capitol Building in Washington D.C.; up to this point, the sculptor had altered his statue’s iconography many times so as not to offend potential clients. For example, America once trod upon a crown to symbolize the successful revolt of the Colonies against the British Crown; so as not to discourage a British patron, Powers removed the crown from beneath the foot. A vehement opponent of slavery, the sculptor censored himself many times from carving chains beneath America’s foot in case a southern patron might become interested in the work and interpret the attribute as
an anti-slavery statement. Only after Congress passed its 1855 resolution and Powers seemed assured of receiving a government commission for a sculpture did he finally carve the chains in reaction to the controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which allowed the two states to decide slavery issues by popular sovereignty.

At the time that the 1855 resolution was passed, Powers was certain that *America* would be the work chosen by the government to adorn the Capitol. However, when President James Buchanan finally ordered work from Powers in 1859, the commission was for two life-size statues, one of Thomas Jefferson and one of Benjamin Franklin. *America* did not find an exhibition site until 1861 when it was shown to critical acclaim at the first Italian National Exhibition where it was interpreted as representative of Italy’s struggles for unity, achieved that same year. The marble *America* was destroyed in 1865 by a fire; the plaster cast is now housed at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C.

The Art Institute’s bust of *America* is one of twenty-eight produced by Hiram Powers between 1850 and 1873; it was purchased directly from the artist’s daughter in 1910 for considerably less than a nineteenth-century patron would have been expected to pay. Its patriotic subject matter and pronounced Graeco-Roman features such as the himation, or cloth, draped over one breast, head in partial profile, and blank, yet ideally beautiful expression made it one of the sculptor’s most popular pieces with mid-nineteenth century American clients. Stripped of most of its iconographic detail, save

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for the crown of stars, the *America* bust is a simplified, more easily digestible symbol than the complex full-size statue.

Allegorizing the United States as a dignified, classically beautiful woman dates back to the early years of the new nation when leaders of the country were searching for an apt symbolic depiction of democratic values. As a continent, a mere geographical area, America had been represented as an Indian princess, a Greek goddess, and various other female incarnations. With independence from England came the desire to embody the nation’s political philosophy in a single figure; subsequent images of “America” sought not only to embrace the republican aspirations of the country, but its revolutionary origins and aesthetic ambitions as well. Hiram Powers’s bust of *America* emblematized the country’s values in a traditional manner without the complications implicit in his inclusion of chains in the full-length statue, hence the bust’s popularity.

It is informative to compare the original statue to its companion bust to gain insight into ideas that otherwise have been lost in translation. Whereas a full-size piece can incorporate a much more complex iconographic web into its composition, a bust relies upon a simplified structure to express its meaning. The ambiguity Powers felt toward the United States’s slavery policies has been lost in the bust. Instead, one is left with the sculptor’s idealistic conception of a statue that would “…emphasize the blessings and charms of our splendid union” and symbolize the country that “Europe beholds afar off…the light and hope of mankind.”

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QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. Explore the symbolism in Hiram Powers’ *America* sculptures (both the full-length figure and the bust.) Next, have students sketch designs for sculptures that incorporate their personal symbols of America. Discuss their choice of symbols; would they have been relevant in 1850 or are they the results of incidents and issues of recent times?

2. Powers’ *America* bust was heavily influenced by classical art. Have students research the formal similarities between the two as well as political or philosophical reasons that Powers and many other artists and architects may have looked to ancient Greece and Rome during a time of great pride in America’s democratic values.

3. Discuss with students the concepts of realism versus idealism. Under which category does *America* fall, and why? Have students imagine that Powers sculpted the bust in a more realistic style; would the impact have been the same? Compare *America* with other images in this resource guide for a comparative look at realism and idealism. Suggestions are: *Mrs. D. Hubbard* (slide 3); *American Gothic* (slide 16); *Miner Joe* (slide 17); *Trolley, New Orleans* (slide 22); *Sharecropper* (slide 23); and *M & H* (slide 25).

4. See “America Personified” in “Sample Lessons” section.


3 For a complete overview of the iconographic evolution of America see Vivien Green Fryd.


7 Fryd, p. 66

8 Fryd, p. 64.