

## BOOK REVIEW

*Classical New York: Discovering Greece and Rome in Gotham*. Edited by ELIZABETH MACAULAY-LEWIS AND MATTHEW M. MCGOWAN. New York, NY: Empire State Editions, an Imprint of Fordham University Press, 2018. Pp. 284. Hardback, \$43.79. ISBN: 978-0-8232-8104-6.

This book grew out of a conference sponsored by the New York Classical Club in March of 2015, titled “Classical New York: Greece and Rome in NYC’s Art, Architecture, and History.” As such, it offers an in-depth look at selected topics, rather than a comprehensive survey of all classically-influenced monuments within the five boroughs. The editors admit on the first page of the preface that “this book makes no claim to comprehensiveness” (vii). They also state at the outset that, apart from a chapter on the Gould Memorial Library and Hall of Fame in the Bronx, the book is Manhattan-focused (7). At the same time, it occasionally leaves New York altogether, as when the chapter on “The Imperial Metropolis” begins with a discussion of the Columbian Exhibition in 1893 Chicago. The book follows a rough chronological order, starting with the building known to New Yorkers today as “Federal Hall” and ending with a brief discussion with the quote from Vergil on the 9/11 memorial.

Both editors have extensive experience in showing the impact of classical antiquity on New York City. Macaulay-Lewis runs the website “Antiquity in Gotham: Exploring Ancient Architecture and Culture in New York City” (<https://ancientarchny.commons.gc.cuny.edu/>). This site includes links to ten podcasts, many of which are delivered by contributors to *Classical New York*. McGowan is currently compiling a comprehensive guide to the Greek and Latin inscriptions of New York City, and he has frequently spoken at professional meetings about these inscriptions.

The editors summarize the broad categories of studies to be found in the book:

Some chapters ... deal with how and why a classicizing building references a particular ancient building or style; they focus primarily on the monuments and less on the architects or patrons behind them ... Other chapters ... attempt to

understand works of art, buildings, theatrical performances, and the Latin language by how they were used or appreciated; they tend to privilege the perspective of patrons, architects, and users (7).

The first chapter after the introduction, Francis Morrone's "The Custom House of 1833-42: A Greek Revival Building in Context," notes the effect of the "archaeology boom of the eighteenth century" (19) on the young nation and on New York City in particular. Morrone makes a point that runs throughout *Classical New York*. While the ideals of American democracy owed more to Periclean Athens than to the Roman Republic, much of the architecture—even the so-called "Greek Revival," is more Roman than Greek (20). As the Romans took Greek architectural elements and used their own technologies to create something new, so did American architects take inspiration from Roman building programs.

One theme that runs throughout the book is the celebration of America as the "new Roman Empire," and in particular New York City as the "new Rome," expressed via public buildings. Margaret Malamud's chapter "The Imperial Metropolis" discusses monuments such as the train stations which served as "grand ceremonial gateways, signaling arrival in the city." (45) A later chapter, "Rome Reborn: Old Pennsylvania Station and the Legacy of the Baths of Caracalla," describes in greater detail the construction and lifetime of a landmark whose destruction still grieves many New Yorkers. Malamud also briefly mentions the lavish public baths built towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Allyson McDavid goes into detail in "The Roman Bath in New York: Public Bathing, the Pursuit of Pleasure, and Monumental Delight." This article shows the complex history of public baths. Initially established in the late 1800s as a philanthropic project to promote public health and stop the spread of disease among impoverished (often immigrant) New Yorkers, they gradually acquired the reputation of environments for sexual promiscuity and were subsequently almost completely abolished, especially during the spread of AIDS in the 1980s.

While most of the book focuses on the adaptation of classical architecture in the buildings of New York, a few chapters emphasize attitudes towards the Greek and Roman cultures themselves. Elizabeth Bartman's chapter on "Archaeology versus Aesthetics: The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Classical Collection in Its Early Years" traces the challenges of creating a collection of antiquities to equal the great museums of Europe. The concluding chapter of the book, Matthew McGowan's "In Ancient and Permanent Language: Artful Dialogue in the Latin

Inscriptions of New York City,” focuses on inscriptions and ends with the controversial inscription adapted from Vergil’s *Aeneid* on the 9/11 memorial: “NO DAY SHALL ERASE YOU FROM THE MEMORY OF TIME.” The latter showcases the complex relationship between the contemporary world and the classical past: It is in English rather than Latin, stripped of the context of its source—and yet it reinforces the long-standing association of classical antiquity with dignity and solemnity.

This book was not intended to be a guidebook, and a reader eager to explore classically-inspired buildings in New York City may be frustrated at the amount of attention given to destroyed or dilapidated buildings as opposed to those still standing. Grand Central Station, for example, receives very little ink. One notable exception is Jared A. Simard’s “The Titans of Rockefeller Center,” which would be at home in a Blue Guide or other companion to the erudite traveler. Simard explores in depth the myths represented in this Forum of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Caesar, especially the statues of Prometheus and Atlas.<sup>1</sup>

In their concluding pages, titled “Reflections,” the editors acknowledge a drop-off of visibly classical elements in New York City’s buildings after the aforementioned Rockefeller Center. But they also hint at the possibility of a sequel: one expanding the chronological span, or focusing more on boroughs other than Manhattan.

*Excelsior!*

MARIANTHE COLAKIS

<sup>1</sup> Not all classicists have been as respectful of the statues. In his essay “Kitsch,” Gilbert Highet wrote, “One of my favorite pieces of bad art is a statue in Rockefeller Center, New York. It is supposed to represent Atlas, the Titan condemned to carry the sky on his shoulders. That is an ideal of somber, massive tragedy: greatness and suffering combined as in Hercules or Prometheus. But this version displays Atlas as a powerful moron, with a tiny little head, rather like the pan-fried young men who appear in the health magazines. Instead of supporting the heavens, he is lifting a spherical metal balloon: it is transparent, and quite empty; yet he is balancing insecurely on one foot like a furniture mover walking upstairs with a beach ball; and he is scowling like a mad baboon. If he ever gets the thing up, he will drop it; or else heave it onto a Fifth Avenue bus. It is a supremely ridiculous statue, and delights me every time I see it.” From *A Clerk of Oxenford: Essays on Literature and Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954, reprinted 1970), p. 218.

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