

24: Frederick MacMonnies *Nathan Hale* (1890)

Christopher Clarke

The Memorial Art Gallery's arresting bronze of Nathan Hale, a diminutive but no less powerful replica of the original that stands today in New York's City Hall Park, embodies one of America's most compelling popular narratives of Revolutionary War heroism. In the fall of 1776, Hale, a young officer in the Continental Army, bravely accepted a dangerous assignment to penetrate the lines of the British Army as an undercover spy in order to discover the strength and disposition of British forces on Long Island. Unmasked as he made his way back through the British lines, Hale was captured and summarily sentenced to be hanged. In the minutes leading up to his execution, he is reputed to have uttered the words that have served for two centuries as the timeless motto of American patriotism: "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country."¹

In 1889, Frederick MacMonnies, a young protégé of the American master Augustus Saint-Gaudens, sought and won a commission from the Sons of the American Revolution of New York State for a sculpture of Nathan Hale for City Hall Park, one of the epicenters of Manhattan's burgeoning, energetic metropolis. MacMonnies enthusiastically embraced the task of realizing Hale's heroic tale in three dimensions. The son of Scottish immigrants, MacMonnies eagerly absorbed accounts of Hale's patriotic deed and the spirit of determination and sacrifice that it expressed. The sculptor conceived a proud, determined, reserved but unbowed figure, dignified and resolute in the face of imminent death. About the Hale sculpture, MacMonnies later offered a reflection that was destined to become as oft quoted in reference to the artist as Hale's famous words were in reference to the patriot: "I wanted to make something that would set the boot-blacks and little clerks around there thinking—something that would make them want to be somebody and find life worth living."²

To encounter MacMonnies's *Nathan Hale* is to be persuaded that the artist fulfilled his ambition. *Hale* is a powerful work that embodies the passionate, impressionistic style of the Beaux-Arts school in Paris, where he studied in the 1880s. Its vitality, its taut yet sincere emotionalism, and the "surface bravado" with which it contrasts flickering light and shadow all combine to captivate the viewer.³ The drama of Hale's last moments is manifest in his disheveled appearance and his bound arms and feet, and yet MacMonnies manages to reach beyond even his own realism—he leaves Hale's hands free to gesture, personifying the hero's transcendence of his immediate bonds, and his purpose and resolve as the moment of his sacrifice draws near. MacMonnies captures not just Hale's idealism but the late-nineteenth-century idealism of the American nation in an era of grand anniversaries—the Centennial of the Declaration of Independence in 1876 and of the Constitution in 1887—and lavish testaments to progress, such as the impending Columbian Exposition (1893) that marked the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the New World (and for which MacMonnies would create his monumental *Columbian Fountain*).

These commemorations arrived at a moment when patriotic American heroes were much in demand, but in lamentably short supply. Decades had passed since the great national sacrifices of the Civil War (such as those soon to be enshrined in Boston on the *Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw and the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment* by Saint-Gaudens). By the end of the 1880s, especially in New York, patriotic heroism had been surpassed by the emergence of a business culture dominated by "robber barons," the politics of machine corruption and the boodle bag, labor unrest, sharp economic panics, and perceived threats to the "Americanness" of America brought on by wave after wave of foreign immigration.⁴ Not surprisingly, it was a time when Americans looked with some nostalgia to the days of revolutionary idealism for their heroes.



MacMonnies's own history helps explain why he was poised to accede to the top rank of American sculptors at a time when the popular taste for celebration in bronze of heroic figures like Nathan Hale was at a peak. MacMonnies was born in 1863 into a middle-class New York City family whose once-prosperous grain business was in decline. Pursuing his evident artistic talents while of necessity working as a clerk, he had the profound good fortune at age sixteen to secure an apprenticeship in the studio of Augustus Saint-Gaudens. After five years of apprenticeship with America's premier sculptor, as well as study at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League, he journeyed to Paris, where he entered the *École des Beaux-Arts*. For the next several years he moved back and forth between Paris and New York, establishing a private studio, earning a series of minor commissions, and maintaining his relationship with Saint-Gaudens, with whose assistance he secured, at age twenty-six, the *Nathan Hale* commission.⁵

The erection of a monument in celebration of Nathan Hale's heroism seems more than a bit ironic at a time when American society and culture mocked so much of what Hale stood for, at least in the public mind. But the demise of American idealism under the weight of Gilded Age money and power in fact made the choice of Hale as a subject all the more compelling. In the late 1800s, Hale's stature as a first-rate American hero stood unchallenged, as it does today.

Nevertheless, celebrants of Hale's heroism must embrace the ideal version of Hale's tragic undercover misadventure. Friends who heard of the young officer's willingness to risk his life and who feared the worst tried but ultimately failed to dissuade him from his purpose. Hale undertook his mission with little support and no knowledge of the tradecraft of espionage, and met his end as a result of treachery and deceit to which he rather foolishly fell victim.⁶ The recent discovery of a credible manuscript diary by a Connecticut Tory detailing Hale's lack of guile and his capture by American Loyalist Major Robert Rogers (a hero in his own right of the French and Indian War) reinforces the poignancy but also the pointlessness of Hale's sacrifice. However brave Hale was, he was not able to keep the secret of his spy mission from a fellow officer who feigned allegiance to the American cause, and then sprang the trap that led to Hale's arrest.⁷

To acknowledge the folly of Hale's quest, however, would be to question the value of Hale's sacrifice. MacMonnies boldly offers us Hale at his very best, and speaks to the power of the Hale narrative in our culture. He gives it life, passion, and three-dimensional vitality as no other Hale portraitist was able to do.⁸

(Facing page)
 Frederick MacMonnies,
 1863–1937
Nathan Hale, 1890
 Bronze, 28 1/8 x 9 1/2 x 5 1/16 in.
 Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
 86.4

Rather like Hale's high-minded words on the gallows, MacMonnies's reported reference to Manhattan's "boot-blacks and little clerks" also demands a moment of critical reflection. A phrase oft repeated begins to take on a self-evident life of its own, and those who have written about MacMonnies's *Hale* over the past century have routinely cited the artist's words with approval. Perhaps as befits both his station in life and his celebrity at the time he is said to have uttered them, MacMonnies's words carry with them a whiff of elitism and perhaps a measure of condescension towards the crowds that he assumed would pass by his *Hale* on a daily basis. They bring



Augustus Saint-Gaudens
 American (born France),
 1848–1907
Shaw Memorial, Soldier's Head,
 1883–1893
 Bronze, 7 1/2 x 3 1/4 x 5 1/2 in.
 Gift of Richard Brush and
 the Maurice R. and Maxine
 B. Forman Fund in honor of
 Grant Holcomb's twentieth
 year as director of the
 Memorial Art Gallery, 2006.9

Saint-Gaudens's life-size
*Memorial to Robert Gould Shaw
 and the Massachusetts
 Fifty-fourth Regiment* stands
 across from the Massachusetts
 State House in Boston.

Frederick MacMonnies,
1863–1937
Nathan Hale (back), 1890
Bronze, 28 3/4 x 9 1/2 x 5 13/16 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
86.4



Frederick MacMonnies,
1863–1937
Nathan Hale at City Hall Park,
Manhattan (life-size), 1890
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to mind the words of a more contemporary and more infamous New Yorker, the heiress and hotel maven Leona Helmsley, who observed that she thought the responsibility for paying taxes pertained only to “the little people” in America. (No doubt she would have benefited from a better acquaintance with the idealism and willingness to make a personal sacrifice that shines forth from MacMonnies’s *Hale*.)

As we confront MacMonnies’s own reported words, we discover that much like Hale’s reputed oration, they conceal as much as they reveal, and warrant a more critical reflection than they sometimes receive. Ultimately, however, we are left with MacMonnies’s ability to imbue bronze with the power of testament and to embody the unabashed idealism of a national hero. Most heroes reveal flaws if examined closely, but not so the Hale of this remarkable work, in which the pathos is genuine, the sacrifice noble, its meaning clear. Thus the artist captures the essence of the heroic narrative and returns it to us in a visual *tour de force*. For all of the contradictions in the events it embodies, MacMonnies’s *Nathan Hale* shows us why heroes are necessary—and how much we miss them when they are gone.

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