

Exhibit Hall

Becoming Americans: A Historical Perspective

Exhibit by Phillip Ratner



When Eleanor Sreb, of the Smithsonian Folklife Center, and Ross Holland, National Park Service Associate Director for Cultural Resources Management, approached artist Phillip Ratner to create artwork for Ellis Island, Ratner initially thought, "How do I fit the entire world into a single piece?" Ratner sat for hours on a bench in the Great Hall at Ellis Island sketching, thinking, observing--trying to capture the essence of the immigration experience. Ratner conjured up images of the millions of immigrants who passed through that Great Hall--travel weary people of all ages, creeds and nationalities who hungered for a new life in America. "I picked up the ghosts," Ratner said, "and it changed my life. I felt my grandparents' energy and that of the thousands of immigrants who passed through those halls."

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Ratner sketched and then sculpted (welding together armatures as skeletons, then applying a polyvinyl that hardened when fired) the essence of the immigrant experience. Ratner created five large bronze sculptures which now stand at the base of the [Statue of Liberty](#) [1]; eight large bronze sculptures that stand near the "Wall of Remembrance" on Liberty Island; and 33 smaller sculptures housed on the third floor of the National History Museum at [Ellis Island](#) [2]. The early sketches of these sculptures, along with poems also written by Ratner, are commemorated forever in a soon to be published book by AILF and Ratner.

To learn how Phillip Ratner created these statues, watch this [video clip](#) [3]. View the [Statues inside Ellis Island](#) [4].

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Although these sculptures do not specifically depict any one ethnic group, Ratner's immigrants are anything but non-descript--mothers carrying infants, single fathers holding all their earthly possessions in two hands, grandfathers with grandchildren, entire families huddled together--indicative of the way immigrants arrived at Ellis Island.

"I get very emotional responses to these pieces," Ratner said. "I simply create and everyone reads their own story into the piece of art they see."

Ratner's impressionist style certainly captures the immigrant spirit and inspires the questions, "Who were these Ellis Island immigrants? How and why did they come here? How does their journey inform the modern immigrant experience?"

Whatever your immigration story might be, we hope these images inspire you to think about what it might be like to be an immigrant today. Does anyone care where you came from or why you are here? Does your voice, journey, desire for a better life also have a place in America's history books?

About the Artist



Internationally-renowned multimedia artist and native Washingtonian, Phillip Ratner is the grandson of Ellis Island immigrants. Ratner's grandfather, Mose Ratner, immigrated to America and was an original musician in the National Symphony Orchestra.

Also known as "The Artist of Ellis Island," Ratner's bronze sculptures stand at the base of the Statue of Liberty on Liberty Island in New York, eight large bronzes symbolic of the immigrants that stand outside the Statue of Liberty near the "Wall of Remembrance" and 33 patinated statues housed in the National History Museum at Ellis Island.

With degrees from the Pratt Institute and American University, Ratner taught art for 23 years in the Washington, D.C. area. Ratner works in sculpture, painting, glass, tapestry, drawing, lithography and graphic arts and has exhibited his art at the Library of Congress, Supreme Court, Vatican, White House, The National Collection of Fine Arts, The National Academy of Science, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, B'nai B'rith and the National Zoo.

In 1984, Ratner and his wife, Ellen, moved to Safed, Israel, to found a museum dedicated to Hebrew Bible stories called the ["Israel Bible Museum."](#) [5] The Israel Bible Museum, now in Be'ersheva, Israel, boasts more than 250 works of art on the Bible in sculpture, painting and graphics. In addition, he has completed many private commissions and public works.

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His latest work includes a 6 foot statue of the famed exiled 14th century Italian poet, Dante, and an oversized chess set including sculpted characters from Dante's Divina Commedia commissioned by an important patron. Ratner's current work can be seen at The Ratner Museum in Bethesda, Maryland.

For more information on Ratner's work, visit www.ratnermuseum.com [6].

[View the Statues inside Ellis Island](#) [4]

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Links:

[1] <http://ratnermuseum.com/?page=statue-of-liberty>

[2] <http://ratnermuseum.com/?page=ellis-island>

[3] http://www.aif.org/exhibit/ratner08/Ratner_flash.swf

[4] <http://www.aif.org/exhibit/ratner08/ratnerslides.shtml>

[5] <http://www.israelbiblemuseum.com/>

[6] <http://www.ratnermuseum.com/>