An Artist and His City: The Versatile Oeuvre of Gaetano Federici (1880–1964)

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Gaetano Federici (1880–1964), Sculptor.
Curated by Heather Garside.
Lambert Castle, Paterson, New Jersey.
July 2016–ongoing.

On the banks of the Passaic River rise the roofs, church spires, and factory chimneys of Paterson, New Jersey, an area inhabited for centuries by the Delaware tribe, a Lenape offshoot of the Algonquin (Nelson and Shriner 1920, 1: 9–12). Currently the third-largest city in the state, Paterson had its heyday during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. It was the first planned industrial settlement in the nation, under the impetus of Alexander Hamilton’s Society for the Establishment of Useful Manufactures, incorporated in 1792. It became an industrial powerhouse, producing cotton, linen, paper, and machinery by the mid-nineteenth century, until 1841 when John Ryle “launched the silk industry which by 1910 boasted 300 mills and 25,000 workers” (Herbst 1985, 28), providing substantial wealth for its social elite of entrepreneurs and financial brokers (Nelson and Shriner 1920, 1: 340–350). Paterson attracted numerous waves of emigration: Germans, Irish, Dutch, Jews, and later Italians, Eastern Europeans, Arab, Turkish, and Hispanic immigrants from the Caribbean and Central America. Its sizable African American population predates the Great Migration to before the Civil War.

Today Paterson is a diverse community with one of the nation’s largest Muslim populations. Since the 1960s, Paterson has lost much of its past economic power but retains a distinctive foothold in the cultural history of New Jersey. It has a vibrant labor history in which “worker culture” was expressed through “unions, political activities, ethnic churches, cooperatives, and associations” (Herbst 1985, 28), marked in particular by the Paterson silk workers’ strike of 1913. The city had established an extensive and active anarchist community, a member of which, Gaetano Bresci, returned to Italy to assassinate King Umberto in July of 1900. Paterson was also the home of many notable scientists, actors, and writers—William Carlos Williams...
immortalized it in his five-volume modernist epic poem published between 1946 and 1958. The city fosters numerous cultural initiatives in the literary and visual arts through Passaic County Community College (PCCC) and its historic Hamilton Club, as well as through the work and occasional collaboration of its three museums. (These are the Passaic County Historical Society [PCHS], Paterson Museum, and the American Labor Museum at the Botto House.) Its historical landmarks, buildings, monuments, and stately edifices populate street corners and parks; among them stand the public sculptures created by Paterson’s “sculptor laureate,” Gaetano Federici, whose lifetime spanned Paterson’s rising economic fortune. While Federici’s first works date to 1894 and 1898 (such as the Peeble House frieze), his most productive years were from 1903 to 1957, during which, as stated on the Federici Collections website, he “completed no less than forty commissioned public monuments within a two-mile radius of Paterson’s City Hall” (“Timeline” 2017).

In July 2016, a long-term exhibit of Federici’s work opened in the opulent Lambert Castle mansion. Built in 1892 by Catholina Lambert, a successful silk industry entrepreneur, and maintained in pristine condition by its current owner, the County of Passaic, it is now headquarters of PCHS. The exhibit comprises small-scale sculptures, plaster models, plaques, and medallions by Federici. In all, more than thirty works are on view, many of which were restored through a conservation project begun by PCHS in 2013 and supported through fund-raising among individuals, organizations, and businesses throughout Passaic County.

Federici’s oeuvre has been widely acknowledged—a street in his native Castelgrande, Italy, bears his name; an entry in the Encyclopedia of American Biography of 1966 includes an overview of his life and work; several exhibits of his work have taken place in Paterson with a detailed catalog, including a bibliographical essay by Flavia Alaya based on extensive research; a documentary video of his life and work was produced by historian and videographer Vince Parrillo; the Federici Studio Collection of more than two-hundred sculptures and his studio workshop are on permanent exhibit at PCCC in the majestic upstairs galleries of the Hamilton Club. Nonetheless, neither Federici’s deep roots in the cityscape and local history of Paterson (one of his defining strengths) nor his prolific and versatile work of sixty-five years seem to have precluded a measure of undeserved neglect on the national level. For instance, he is not featured in Regina Soria’s authoritative 1993 biographical dictionary of Italian American artists. Most recently, many years of struggle by a Brownsville (Brooklyn) community were not successful in saving the church of Our Lady of Loreto, built by Antonio Federici and Sons in 1907, and whose façade sculptures were the work of Gaetano Federici. The Brooklyn Diocese did not halt demolition plans and the church was razed on October 2017 to
make way for affordable housing, dealing a severe blow to the preservation of the Federici artistic heritage.

Born in 1880 in Castelgrande in the province of Potenza (Basilicata), Gaetano Federici immigrated to the United States with his family in 1887 and settled in booming industrial Paterson, where his father, Antonio, had a business as a mason and contractor. After graduating from Paterson’s public schools in 1897, Federici went to New York City to study sculpture under Giuseppe Moretti. Between 1897 and 1900, he was the first apprentice to work in bronze at the famous Roman Bronze Works; from 1900 to 1903, he studied with William Ordway Partridge in Brooklyn and as an associate of Charles Henry Niehaus. He also studied at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League in New York City. In 1903, Federici returned to Paterson and opened a studio in a former barn at the corner of Van Houten and Prospect Streets. The following year he accompanied Moretti “to mount the gigantic Vulcan statue for the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair” (“Timeline” 2017) and, in 1912, to Havana, Cuba, to work with him on “the sculptural decoration of Havana’s grand Beaux-Arts Centro Gallego” (Alaya 1980, 12).

Federici’s first public commission was a sculpture of Congressman James Fleming Stewart, dedicated in 1905 in front of the Passaic County Courthouse. His reputation was enhanced by support from prominent local newspapermen, and he received further commissions, in particular during the 1920s. Among the most famous of these are: the seated large-scale statue of Reverend William McNulty, a beloved Roman Catholic dean of Passaic County (1924); the monument to Paterson Mayor Nathan Barnert (1925); and a 1942 bust of Paterson native Lou Costello. In 1925, he moved to his second studio, on North Eighth Street; Federici lived and worked there for the rest of his artistic career, producing church and secular carvings and monuments, such as the 1928 lunette carving *St. Michael Overpowering Lucifer* for St. Michael’s Roman Catholic Church in Paterson. He joined the faculty of Paterson State Teachers College in 1937, offering studio art sculpture courses (Smyk 2014, 4). During his career, Federici produced well over two hundred completed sculptures, busts, lunettes, friezes, and public architectural elements. He was also a remarkable draughtsman—his drawings, overshadowed by the sculpture output, are deserving of greater public exposure, for example, the startlingly moving 1959 *Self-Portrait* in St. Joseph’s Hospital, created at the end of his life (Alaya, 1980, Figure 29, 21).

The more than thirty works exhibited at Lambert Castle consist mostly of sculptures and plaster molds, with a few sketches and a series of photographic montages on panels describing Federici’s life and career. The panels provide interesting dimensions of Federici as artist and as citizen: For instance, in one photograph from circa 1940 we see him instructing a class of art students, all of
whom were women. The selection of works covers a good range of Federici’s methods, subject matter, and skills. He utilized many of the plaster plaques and statuettes as models for his large-scale public works. “Large scale” in his case means that many of these public representations were near twice the height of an adult person; clearly, the sheer size and permanence of these works do not allow them to be shown in the space of the Lambert Castle third-floor mezzanine (now named the Federici Gallery). The exhibit thus evokes the ways Federici developed plaster models into towering bronze pieces. For example, the approximation of scale is shown through two statues of different sizes and one 1908 bust of philanthropist, politician, former mayor, prominent member of Paterson’s Jewish community, and industrialist Nathan Barnert (Nelson and Shriner 1920, 2: 140–144), whom Federici counted as a patron for part of his life (Figure 1).

Several works in the exhibit also stand out for either their historical interest or artistic versatility. Among the former is the 1936 rectangular plaster medallion of the Pledge of Allegiance skillfully colored fully in gold tint; in a very different vein is the bronze plaque, shown as a photograph, commemorating track star Eleanor Egg, American champion in 1932, depicted as remarkably muscular and in full movement. The plaque ornamented the walls of Paterson’s Hinchliffe Stadium, opened in 1932 and designated as a National Historic Landmark in 2013. Other works diverge from the hyperrealistic style in renditions of his contemporaries—Federici was indeed dubbed, as per the 1980 catalog of his work, “The Artist as Historian,” because of his meticulous and passionate attention to historical and cultural detail in rendering the clothing, accessories, and body language of his subjects. A plaster plaque made in homage to Wagner’s Parsifal (1931) follows a more Symbolist aesthetic: The head of the composer is set against images of contorted woods, rocks, and a castle rendered by different levels of raised thicknesses (Figure 2). Similarly, his 1938 bronze plaque A Tribute to Arcangelo Corelli (not on exhibit) layers baroque and neoclassical styles with different planes of symbolic sub-themes on one surface. The Totowa town seal is also striking: With a minimalist
center, it is framed on both sides by male Native American figures, the muscular bodies slightly distorted to fit the oval shape of the seal.

Federici’s combined resonances are most evident in one of his most accomplished works exhibited, a marble head titled *Laughing Girl*, first exhibited in Paterson in 1930 and then shipped to Bologna, Italy, in 1931 for an exhibition of Italian American artists, where it won a gold medal (Alaya 1980, 17). Often noted in brochures as a skilled rendering of smiles and laughter, the work is in fact much more complex: At once classical and baroque, it conveys mixed emotions through dynamic eyes and mouth, capturing laughter as motion and energy (Figure 3). Federici’s sculpture also references the Renaissance Italian technique of *majolica* combined with neoclassical drapery effects and facial expression in a unique piece, a porcelain polychrome group of two female figures in tones of green and pink. A standing figure, one arm raised, appears to shield a smaller one, kneeling at her feet and clinging to her, with outstretched drapery. As in other pieces, Federici has chosen to portray a female figure, the larger of the two, as muscular and energetic even as her face vividly reflects anguish.

The exhibit unavoidably impacts Patersonians familiar with Federici’s work differently than it does those who recently discovered him. Interest in his entire body of work and its context compelled this reviewer to learn more, and I made a second visit to Paterson, to the Federici Studio, and to see collections at the Hamilton Club. Thanks to the generous welcome and gift of time from the collection curator, Jane Haw, and Federici’s granddaughter Patricia Federici, I felt that I had gained greater insight into the artist’s methods, his relationship to monumental production and to open public space, as well as to the social history of his time.

Figure 2. Plaster plaque made in homage to Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1931).

Figure 3. *Laughing Girl* marble head.
His method was noteworthy: Federici produced numerous iterations of his large-scale sculptures of human figures and began with a full nude body in rigorous anatomical detail. Once he was satisfied with the way proportion, posture, and body language were expressed in the nude model, he proceeded to mold clothing and other surface details onto it; he never began his human sculptures with a flat body surface covered by clothing and ornaments. Realism was for him not just a necessity of the commission or of a dominant aesthetic but an exacting process of knowledge and search for truth in the human figure (Figure 4). Further, compositions such as the statue of Dean McNulty incorporated realistic detail that carried

Figure 4. Annotated nude figure. Courtesy of The Federici Studio Collection at Passaic County Community College.

Figure 5. God Bless America (1936). Courtesy of The Federici Studio Collection at Passaic County Community College.
deep social meaning. The clergyman folds in a protective embrace a boy in worn clothing, symbolic of the poor and vulnerable of Paterson. The figure of McNulty also wears heavy work shoes that are visible below his clerical garb. The social dimension of Federici’s work appears in other contexts as well: The frieze *God Bless America* (1936) (Figure 5) features the heads of children of different racial groups presented in a unified stylistic mode, which precludes caricature and stresses the whole, well before diversity became a leading concept. In a section of his World War I memorial (1931) (Figure 6), Federici conspicuously placed a woman and a black soldier.

With its many dimensions, Gaetano Federici’s work merits the recognition that the exhibit at Lambert Castle felicitously reawakens. It is not only an important moment in the cultural and social history of Paterson and its region but also a distinctive contribution within early twentieth-century American sculpture and within the body of work by Italian diaspora sculptors of bronze and stone who were a distinctive and numerous contingent within Italian American artists. They populated the North American landscape with monumental and decorative sculpture, blending a realistic aesthetic with a classical style and individual innovations. Federici’s nearest contemporaries in this group include Paolo Salvatore Abbate (1884–1973), John B. Garatti (1881–1949), Leo Lentelli (1879–1961), Oronzio Maldarelli (1892–1963), Louis Milione (1884–1955), Ulysses Ricci (1888–1960), and, of course, Onorio Ruotolo (1888–1966). It is a pity that discussions of Federici’s work
do not insert him in dialog and comparison with them. Furthermore, the loss and fortuitous recovery of artworks of significance, such as the *Eleanor Egg: America’s Champion* plaques (Martinez 2006, L03), indicate the fragility of artistic legacies, even those of monumental sculptors. Fortunately, exhibits such as the one presented at Lambert Castle in Paterson remind us of the importance of Gaetano Federici’s work and of the rich creative processes involved in producing it.

**Work Cited**


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