“I CONTAIN MULTITUDES”:

THE VARIED LIVES OF A CAST OF J. Q. A. WARD’S *THE FREEDMAN*

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When we speak about art, we often move beyond the objecthood of a work into anthropomorphic embodiment.[1] We talk about the lives a sculpture has lived—life casts, posthumous casts, the life and career of the sculptor. That word "life" has come to encompass a host of meanings—how long a sculpture will last outdoors, for instance. Will it live out a natural life, or will it be toppled in feats of iconoclasm?[2]

What about the lives of an individual cast of John Quincy Adams Ward's *The Freedman* (fig. 1.1)? If this sculpture could speak, would it call upon the words of its contemporary Walt Whitman?

> *Do I contradict myself?*
> *Very well then I contradict myself,*
> *(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*[3]

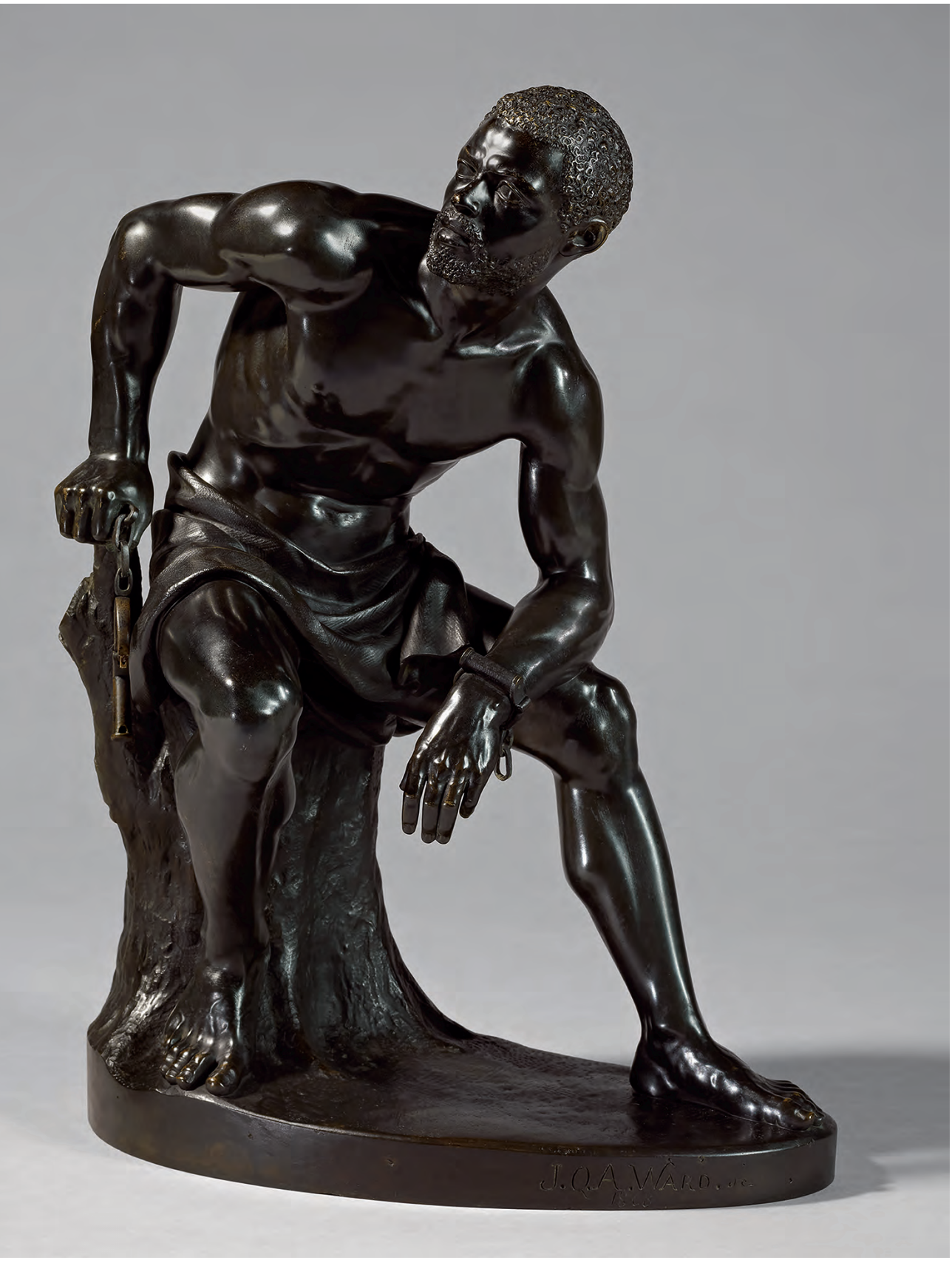
Ward's sculpture in its multiple cast forms was an innovation. In its early life, when it was first conceived, the ink was barely dry on Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation—the sculpture forming a bold statement of the aspirational outcome of a Civil War not yet concluded. Scholars believe *The Freedman* to be one of the first American depictions of a Black figure cast in bronze.[4] To my mind, it is a singularly evocative representation in American sculpture of a Black person liberating himself from enslavement by sheer force of will, breaking the chains that bind him and rising from a position of subjugation.[5] In Ward's words, "I intended it to express not one set free by any proclamation so much as by his own love of freedom and a conscious *power* to brake [*sic*] things. The struggle is not over with him (as it never is in this life), yet I have tried to express a degree of hope in his undertaking."[6]

Compare the work to Thomas Ball's *Freedmen's Memorial* (fig. 1.2) with Lincoln as towering liberator over a cowed Black figure, or with any number of representations based on Josiah Wedgwood's abolitionist medallions that helped inspire Ward (fig. 1.3), and it is clear that *The Freedman* is something truly apart in its revolutionary conception.

The Carter's particular cast of Ward's *The Freedman* is singular. Research indicates it is the only one with an operable shackle (fig. 1.4); the only one that has a brass key suited for a grandfather clock that releases the figure by springing his bonds; and the only one with a minute inscription carved into the openable manacle dedicating it to the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteers, the first all-Black Union regiment (fig. 1.5).[7]

Unlocking or challenging the predicated assumptions that accumulate over the lifetime of an individual artwork, such as one cast of *The Freedman*, is the curator's task, as well as that of the artists and staff members and anyone else who encounters the piece. The context of sympathy, aspiration, strength, and innovation is the way the cast has lived its interpreted life as an object in the Carter's collection. Even so, the process of engagement and encounter with an entity that has lived many lives before us and will live long after us is complex.[8]

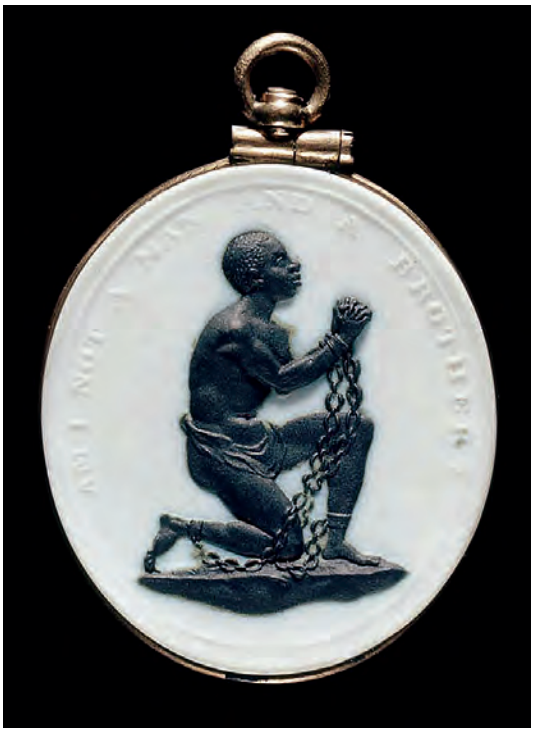
Questions we might ask ourselves: Is the sculpture as self-liberatory as Ward intended if a White railroad magnate of the Gilded Age holds the only key? Is it self-congratulatory or a reminder to continue to work harder if possessed by White abolitionists? If the shackles remain fixed in tempered metal forever, might we consider that enslavement is a ubiquitous, lasting evil humankind will never cease to perpetuate? In these contexts of ownership of a sculpture, the message seems akin to that expressed by cultural historian Saidiya Hartman in a discussion of the lives of Black women at the turn of the century:

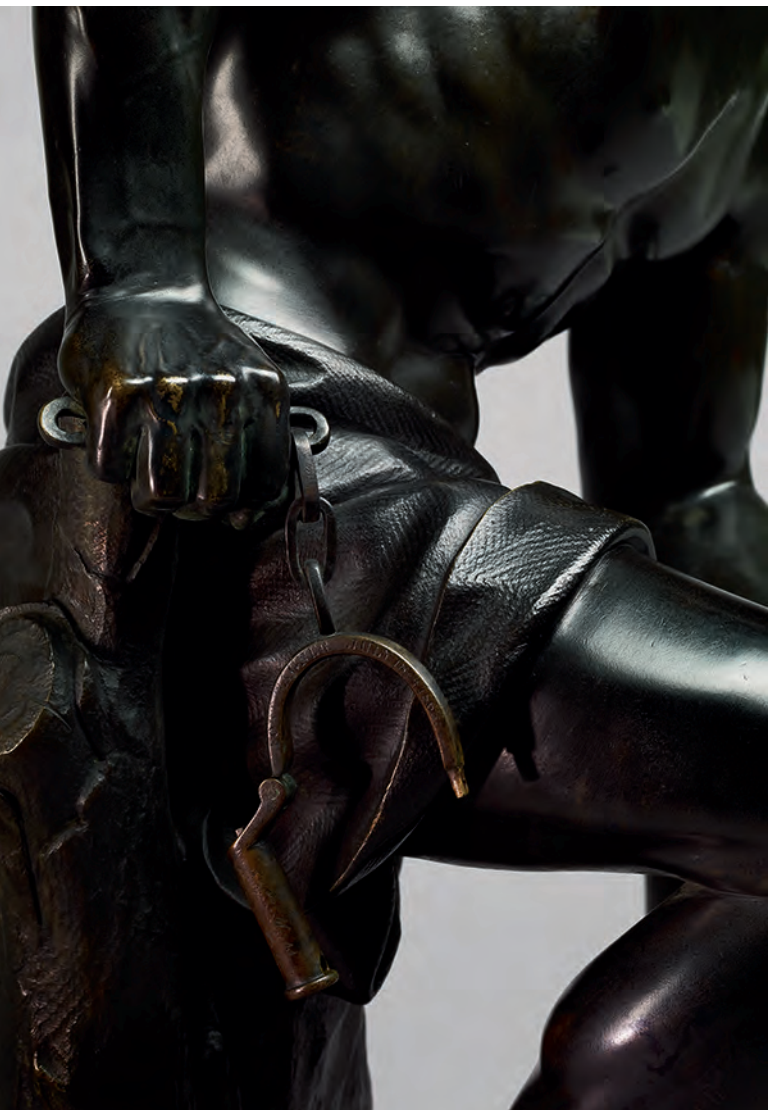

J.Q.A.WARD

1.1 John Quincy Adams Ward (1830–1910), *The Freedman*, 1863, bronze, 19¾ × 14¼ × 10½ in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, 2000.15

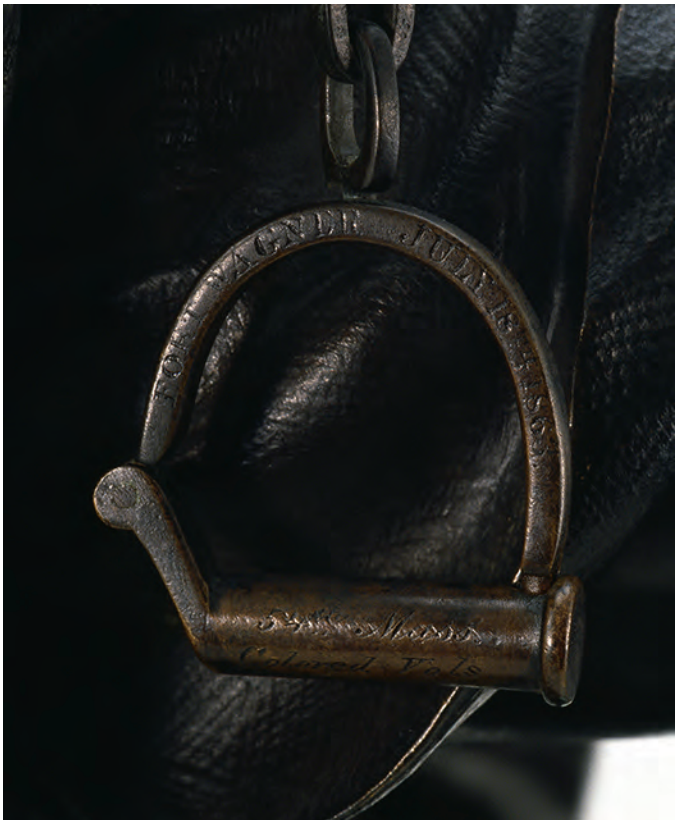
1.2 After Thomas Ball (1819–1911), Currier & Ives, *The Lincoln Statue in Lincoln Square, Washington, D.C.*, 1876, lithograph, 17¾ × 13½ in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, 2019.3

1.3 Anti-slavery medallion, 1786–87, stoneware (jasperware), gold, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Mrs. Richard Baker, 96.779, Photograph © 2023 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston





1.4 John Quincy Adams Ward (1830–1910), *The Freedman* (detail), 1863, bronze, 19¾ × 14¼ × 10½ in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, 2000.15



1.5 John Quincy Adams Ward (1830–1910), *The Freedman* (detail), 1863, bronze, 19¾ × 14¼ × 10½ in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, 2000.15

Inscribed (across arch of shackle): FORT WAGNER JULY 18TH 1863; (across barrel of shackle): 54th Mass. /Colored Vols

> Each new deprivation raises doubts about when freedom is going to come, if the question pounding inside her head—*Can I live?*—is one to which she could ever give a certain answer, or only repeat in anticipation of something better than this, bear the pain of it and the hope of it, the beauty and the promise.[9]

Certainly, the sculpture has a different life and resonance for me as a suburban, East Coast White woman than it has for Alfred Walker, the former head of facilities for more than forty years at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art. When asked to contribute his own label for *The Freedman*, this is what he submitted:

> I first saw *The Freedman* while walking through the galleries at the Carter. I was instantly captivated. My eyes could not get past the shackles on his wrists. Why can't they be removed? My belief is that it's because the shackles are so well hidden in a system that benefits White people who sometimes turn the other way because they are unaffected. I grew up in Stop Six, an all-Black neighborhood on Fort Worth's East Side, so I didn't encounter racial issues until I started working.
>
> When I was a young twenty-year-old housekeeper at the Museum, a White coworker said the N-word while telling me a story. He immediately saw the expression on my face and apologized. We never talked about what was said, but from that day on until his death, he treated me with dignity and respect. So, I know that people can change. I loved this man like a father, and he is the reason I was still working at the Museum forty-one years later. America, I am not asking for you to go back 400 years to make those years right. I am asking that going forward you treat every human being equally.[10]

What if, instead of the aforementioned railroad magnate, our cast had belonged to Dr. Zelma Watson George, a Texas-born diplomat, social-program and university administrator, musicologist, and opera singer whose childhood home frequently hosted Black luminaries such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington (fig. 1.6)?[11] What if we discovered that she kept the sculpture on her piano, where she played and sang some of the 12,000 musical compositions written by African-American artists that were the subject of her doctoral dissertation, performing her music for houseguests like Malcolm X and her frequent visitor Martin Luther King Jr. (fig. 1.7)? Perhaps the social and political dignitaries and everyday citizens she met through her service in the Eisenhower administration, her role as a United Nations delegate, her advocacy for the Cleveland Job Corps Center, her leadership of the League of Women Voters and the NAACP looked on while our cast of *The Freedman* looked back at them? What does it mean that our sculpture found a home surrounded by African art; Gullah baskets; Christmas cards, prints, and letters from the leading Black artists of a half a century who called themselves friends of Zelma; a collection of rare volumes of slave narratives; photographs of the hands of Black luminaries; and signed copies of the poems of Langston Hughes? I wish our sculpture could speak—literally rather than only symbolically.

Quite simply, the rationale for this exhibition is that one sculpture contains multitudes. Something particular is embodied by Ward's *The Freedman* that gives it its numinism, that conjures uncertainty, that mourns hardship, that celebrates potential, that signals perpetual systems of subjugation.

While scholars can certainly help elucidate this phenomenon of multiple valences,

1.6 Zelma Watson George in an undated photograph, MS 5415 Dr. Zelma Watson George Papers and Photographs, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio [Container 44, Folder 17]

1.7 Zelma Watson George with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in an undated photograph, MS 5415 Dr. Zelma Watson George Papers and Photographs, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio [Container 44, Folder 3]

as a curator, I hold the firm belief that a work's best afterlife in an exhibition often comes from putting it in the hands of artists to unlock additional resonance—in this case, artists attuned to Black embodiment and the lasting legacies of enslavement and systems of oppression. To this end, we worked together as a group of twenty-first-century artists and twenty-first-century scholars to take the investigation and instigation this sculpture evokes and demands to create an exhibition and this book. Each contributor was invited to explore *The Freedman* through the lenses of their own lives and professions, and to consider the multiplicity of meanings those contexts create for the investigation of emancipation in literature, art, and human existence—in short, to lend a hand in addressing "the unfinished project of liberation."

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NOTES

1 Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

2 For instance, see Sarah Beetham, "Confederate Monuments and the Inevitable Forces of Change," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 4, 1 (Spring 2018); and "From Spray Cans to Minivans: Contesting the Legacy of Confederate Soldier Monuments in the Era of 'Black Lives Matter,'" *Public Art Dialogue* 6, 1 (2016): 9–33.

3 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (United Kingdom: Wilson & McCormick, 1884), 78.

4 Kirk Savage, "Molding Emancipation: John Quincy Adams Ward's *The Freedman* and the Meaning of the Civil War," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 27, 1 (2001): 27.

5 For more about Ward's innovation, see Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 52–88.

6 Ward to J. R. Lambdin, April 2, 1863, in Savage, *Standing Soldiers*, 56.

7 See Thayer Tolles's essay in this volume for a list of casts and variations.

8 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2009).

9 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2021), 10.

10 Reprinted with permission from Alfred Walker.

11 Zelma Watson George's papers reside at Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, Ohio. Ann Sindelar, reference supervisor, was an invaluable help to my research. Though we reviewed all of Dr. Watson George's papers, we could not discern how Dr. George came upon owning the sculpture—through purchase or inheritance—the history remains unclear.