The Athena of the Portland Cement Safety Trophy (1924): Classical Reception and the American Working Class

By the tracks in Cowan, Tennessee—once a busy railroad hub, now just another empty Appalachian town—sits an image of the goddess Athena. The ancient deity, a central figure on a seven-foot high monument erected by the Portland Cement Association, is pictured holding a lamp before a heroically nude worker, seen from the waist up, whom she leads in bas relief; beneath them a motto reads "Safety Follows Wisdom." Cowan's cement plant had achieved a perfect safety record in 1932 and numerous times after that, though it was hardly alone in winning the PCA's Safety Trophy. In dozens of towns across North America, this image of Athena can be found on markers fittingly made of poured concrete, the elegant archaism of which contemporary newspapers accounts remark upon with praise.

The monument was designed in 1924 by the sculptor Ruth Sherwood, a student (and later spouse) of the notable artist Albin Polasek of the American Academy in Rome and the Art Institute of Chicago. Sherwood was also, evidently, the model for the goddess. No documentary evidence exists—not at the Art Institute, at the Polasek Museum in Florida, nor at the PCA Archive in Los Angeles— for why the artist chose this design. Certainly, the monument's Art Deco sensibility was in keeping with the times: this was, after all, the era of Paul Manship, who brought a modernist aesthetic to Classical subject matter, as his statues of Prometheus and Atlas for Rockefeller Center a decade later would attest (Rather 1993). If the intention of both Sherwood and the PCA for thus depicting the Greek goddess is opaque, still more unclear is the reaction of the workers whose safety the monument represented.

How might they have felt? On the one hand, there is component of blaming the victim in the design: if "Safety Follows Wisdom," then a lack of safety must necessarily follow a lack of wisdom. In this equation, human error is deemed the primary cause of industrial accidents, rather

than overly-long working hours, insufficient training, improperly maintained equipment, etc., all elements distinctly out of workers' control (Andrews 2002). From this perspective, there is something pernicious about this representation of Athena, whose lamp reveals a tendency on Management's part for shifting responsibility onto the backs of the less powerful. The invocation of the Classical figure seems like just another way that the elite wield their education to preserve their privilege.

On the other hand, this depiction of Athena should not be seen in isolation. After years of horrific industrial accidents, the PCA had taken a leading role in the 1920s to introduce safety campaigns into its plants, working with advertising agencies to produce catchy posters about the need to follow standard workplace procedures (imagery was favored over words, it should be noted, for the sake of the many who could not read English, or at all). Posters produced by the National Safety Council featured cartoonish figures with names like "Mr. Otto Nobetter" or "Willie Everlearn" whose reckless behavior causes disasters in the factory and bodily harm to themselves (Aldrich 2002). At the far end of this programmatic spectrum, then, we find Athena and the laborer who looks to the light she lifts. The goddess, in this view, elevates the cement worker by whose side she democratically stands.

How we ultimately interpret this image of Athena and her lamp depends largely on how we view the relationship between Classics and the working classes in the United States a century ago, and perhaps even today. In recent years, Edith Hall and Henry Stead have begun to explore the connection between Classical learning and socio-economic hierarchy in Britain and Ireland. "Ancient Greek and Roman culture might sometimes appear to be the preserve of a privileged elite. This is because it used to play a crucial role in social division," they write on the website, *Classics and Class.* "But this is not the whole story" (*Classics and Class*; Hall and Stead 2020). For a People's History of the Classics in America he Athena of the Portland Cement Association Safety Trophy appears to be an unlikely but important document.

Works Cited

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