

The Pursuit of Happiness by Mara Superior

Essay by Kory Rogers



Mara Superior (Williamsburg, Massachusetts, b. 1951)

***The Pursuit of Happiness***, 2012-14

High-fired porcelain, ceramic oxides, underglaze, glaze, wood, gold leaf, brass, bone, and paper

Courtesy of Merle and Barry Ginsburg

From a distance, Mara Superior's *The Pursuit of Happiness* looks like a beautiful, tiered wedding cake. Its architectural surface has the color and texture of buttercream frosting, drawing viewers in to explore its many layers. Like a cake carefully crafted by a master baker, this sculpture is built with both physical and symbolic layers, each helping to tell a larger story about the effort it takes to create a more perfect union. Superior's artistry shines as she blends a couple's love for history with their hopes for the future.

Commissioned by Merle and Barry Ginsburg in 2012 and completed in 2015, *The Pursuit of Happiness* is Superior's most detailed and ambitious work yet. It stands out not just because of its size but because of its powerful, nonpartisan, patriotic message. Working closely with the Ginsburgs, Superior created a sculpture that reflects the founding values of the United States. She describes it as "a commemorative celebration of the American idea, the great experiment, the system—three branches of government, checks and balances, Grecian democracy dependent on an educated citizenry. Our democracy has been admired the world over."

At the heart of *The Pursuit of Happiness* are two of America's most famous buildings—the White House and the U.S. Capitol—stacked on top of each other. By placing the People's House above the Presidential Mansion, Superior highlights the relationship between leadership and democracy, reminding us that everyday citizens are both the foundation and the guiding force of the country. This striking design encourages viewers to think about the balance of power and the ideals that shape the nation.

The title comes from Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, which lists the "pursuit of happiness" as one of three unalienable rights. The meaning of this phrase has remained open to interpretation since 1776. Over time, people have understood it as the right to privacy, self-determination, and the freedom to follow their dreams. The Ginsburgs hope that Superior's sculpture will inspire viewers, reminding them of "the enduring ideals of our Union and the bedrock of our democratic government: the unalienable rights of all people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Originally designed as a centerpiece for a dining table, *The Pursuit of Happiness* was meant to be seen from every angle. However, as the sculpture grew larger, it no longer fit in its original intended space. Luckily, it found a perfect new home on the Ginsburgs' 18th-century American sideboard, set against the backdrop of a colorful Zuber wallpaper showing scenes from the American Revolution. This unexpected placement added even more meaning to the piece, creating a connection between the past and the present, history and art, and the dreams of early America and the possibilities of today.



Merle and Barry Ginsburg admiring *The Pursuit of Happiness* with President Clinton.  
Courtesy of Merle and Barry Ginsburg.



Below the White House's North Portico, the base of the sculpture displays portraits of Benjamin Franklin and President George Washington on either side of its title, between two "supporter" eagle seals.



Under the White House's South Portico, the base is decorated with a portrait of President Abraham Lincoln and his stovepipe hat bearing the famous phrase from his Gettysburg Address: "For the people, by the people, and of the people," framing E Pluribus Unum—Latin for "Out of many, one."



The base of the sculpture, located under the east end of the White House, features a Fourth of July dinner plate with a classic American meal—a hot dog, a hamburger, and French fries. It also includes a portrait of President Thomas Jefferson and a copy of the United States Declaration of Independence.



The base, located under the west side of the White House, features the first American flag with 13 stars and stripes, a portrait of President James Madison, and a replica of the United States Constitution.



Mara created the detailed architectural features, like balusters, colonnades, and windows, using wooden stamps that her late husband, artist Roy Superior, had made by hand.



Although apple pie was first made in England in the 14th century, it has become a well-known symbol of American culture. This is mainly because, in the 1800s, people in the United States were eager to cultivate and propagate different varieties of apples. Later, patriotic advertisements during World War I and World War II helped make apple pie a quintessentially American dessert.



To Superior, this elegantly dressed figure, wearing a ball gown and a tall wig, titled *Mademoiselle de Paris*, represents the wealthy and influential members of French society that Thomas Jefferson interacted with during his time as the U.S. Minister to France from 1785 to 1789.



This small teapot is decorated on both sides with the slogans “No Stamp Act” and “American Liberty Restored.” It is a replica of an 18th-century English teapot that was made especially for American consumers. The Stamp Act, passed by the British Parliament on March 22, 1765, placed a tax on all printed materials in the American colonies. This angered many colonists and led to strong protests, eventually causing the British government to repeal the tax in 1766.



The Phrygian cap, also known as the “Liberty cap,” is a soft, cone-shaped red hat with a forward-bent tip. It became a strong symbol of freedom from oppression during the American and French Revolutions. In the United States, it appears in government seals and patriotic artwork.



Two statue busts of Presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson stand on top of the Capitol, each with a special bottle of alcohol. Washington has a bottle of whiskey made at his Mount Vernon estate, while Jefferson has a bottle of his favorite Madeira, a sweet Portuguese wine.

## Artist Bio



Artist Mara Superior is known for her sculptural porcelain works that blend fine art with the decorative arts. Her high-relief platters and intricate objects feature painterly motifs that explore themes ranging from domestic life to cultural, political, and environmental issues. Superior's work offers thoughtful commentary on contemporary culture through a historical lens.

Her manifold achievements include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, the prestigious Guldaggersgård Residency in Denmark, and multiple Massachusetts Cultural Council grants.

Superior's art has been exhibited at institutions including the American Museum of Ceramic Art, Scripps College, and the Fuller Craft Museum, and is held in nationally-known collections including the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, the Museum of Arts and Design, the Peabody Essex Museum, and the Racine Art Museum.

