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# Religion

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## ARTIST STATEMENT

## SHARON LANGE

Sharon Lange discusses her painting "FREEDOM — Liberty Lighting our Way." Lange lives in Spring Lake:

In this allegorical scene, we see Lady Liberty, personified, her torch ablaze, lighting our way through the darkness (evil); the ethereal quality of her edges symbolizing she is an "ideal" that we all look up to and hold dear. Liberty, standing strong and proud, charging forward, while draped in an American flag, has an American soldier poised at her feet. He is looking intently into the distance illuminated by her light, ready to protect all of the freedoms we enjoy. As she leads, we see her surrounded by all of us, representing the diverse fabric of our nation. Within our faces, you can see a full range of emotion: some filled with comfort and peace, secure in the sanctuary they have come to know here; many filled with relief having found a refuge in this turbulent world; some tired and weary, longing to feel the safe blanket of freedom. The composition speaks to the strengths of us as a collective, and diversity the secret to our strength. Just as cotton and synthetic fabric have their individual advantages and disadvantages, a blend creates a stronger, more resilient garment that will, without a doubt, hold together better over time. So, too, is the fabric of our nation, made stronger by our diverse nature, woven together with our collective strengths. These philosophies, intertwined into the fabric of who we are, not without our blemishes, but stronger than any other country on earth.

With our tenacity and determination growing ever stronger, we are firm in our conviction that we will prevail, united in our belief that our most precious inalienable right and she will always be lighting our way.

— Sharon Lange, [mattersmost.com](http://mattersmost.com)

## PURPOSE STATEMENT

## FREEDOM

That precious intangible that we so often take for granted.

The treasure beyond compare that so many have paid the ultimate price for, so that we may enjoy this precious gift.

Yet, night after night, media coverage would have us believe we live in a country riddled by conflict and dissent. They paint a picture of discord, dissonance and racial tension. They eagerly portray all that is wrong with our country rather than all that is right with it. It is time to remember.

Remember that our country was built by different people coming together to build a phenomenal dream. The American dream.

Remember that our melting pot foundation has built the greatest country on earth and that it is our differences that give us strength. Remember that our lives are enriched by diverse associations and that our country is made stronger by the exchange of ideas that spring forth from these relationships.

And remember that we are responsible to foster these harmonious relationships and teach our children that our foundational belief must be love for all people. It's time to challenge all the fear-mongering we hear on every news station.

Today. Step up. Start the conversation. Reject the voices preaching fear and prejudice, and stand up for what this country was built upon. Defend the belief that all men and women are created equal and that freedom and the pursuit of happiness are guaranteed to all of us.

Let's together create a legacy of love and paint a new picture of America, bathed in the warmth of Liberty's light.

— Sharon Lange, [mattersmost.com](http://mattersmost.com)



Artist Sharon Lange created this painting titled, "FREEDOM — Liberty Lighting our Way" for ArtPrize 2015. Based on the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, it portrays freedom of religion, as well as the freedom of speech, a free press and the right to free assembly. The painting will be on display until Dec. 13 at Gallery of Frames Unlimited, 2964 28th St. SE, in Grand Rapids. (Submitted photo/Sharon Lange)

## GRAND RAPIDS

## Giving thanks for our freedom: Religion, press and assembly

By Douglas Klindsch

Director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

During ArtPrize 2015, I walked by a large oil painting in the lobby of the Amway Grand Plaza and suddenly stopped. I knew that person in the painting.

Then I recognized a second. And then a third person. They were an imam, a rabbi and a Catholic priest with whom we have worked in our interfaith efforts here in West Michigan.

The artist was Sharon Lange, and the painting was titled, "FREEDOM — Liberty Lighting our Way." Based on the First Amendment to our Constitution, it portrays our freedom of religion, as well as the freedom of speech, a free press and the right to free assembly. Adopted in 1791, it was one of the ten amendments that constitute the Bill of Rights.

In this season of thanksgiving, we in America, have much for which to be thankful, especially these freedoms that our founders ensured from the beginning of our nation.

The First Amendment says: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Early settlers of the colonies came from different religious backgrounds. Puritans were strong in the New England colonies, while Anglicans were dominant in the South.

There also were Lutherans from Germany, Reformed from the Netherlands and Presbyterians from Scotland, as well as Catholics, Quakers, Methodists, Baptists, and a few Jewish congregations. Also, it should be noted many of the slaves brought to America were Muslim, but were not permitted to practice their religion.

State-established religion was common in most European countries, and the early settlers were aware of that pattern. In some cases, they came here to avoid that practice but, on the other hand, many of the original colonies had established religions.

Most of them required state officials to take a pledge supporting Christian doctrine, and in many cases, it was specified that they



Sharon Lange's "FREEDOM — Liberty Lighting our Way" was shown at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel in Grand Rapids during ArtPrize 2015. (Cory Morse/MLive.com)

## IF YOU GO

## "FREEDOM — LIBERTY LIGHTING OUR WAY"

The painting by Sharon Lange, "FREEDOM — Liberty Lighting our Way" is on display until Dec. 13 at Gallery of Frames Unlimited at the Southridge Center, 2964 28th St. SE in Grand Rapids. For more information, prints and holiday cards featuring the painting, go online at [mattersmost.com](http://mattersmost.com)

## had to be Protestant.

In the Maryland colony as well as a number of the southern colonies, the Anglican Church was the established church and Catholics were not allowed to vote.

Thus, the First Amendment was originally a restriction on Congress and did not apply to the states until much later.

Likewise in the Constitution, Article Six provides that "no religious test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

Again, for many years this applied only to federal offices.

Among our founders, we have Thomas Jefferson and James Madison to especially thank for this affirmation of religious freedom.

Jefferson was in Paris serving as our ambassador to France when the Constitution was drafted. He wrote Madison with his concerns about a bill of rights and especially the inclusion of religious freedom.

Madison is considered the main drafter of the constitution as well as the Bill of Rights and later became our fourth president.

Jefferson not only wrote the Declaration of Independence, but was the author of the

Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which was passed in 1786 and was the model for the First Amendment.

It is of interest that Jefferson requested that the authorship of these two documents, and the fact that he founded the University of Virginia, be the only things noted on his tombstone. Being our third president of the United States didn't make the top three, in his opinion.

Thanks to the freedom of religion championed by these two founders and presidents of our United States, we now enjoy an unprecedented diversity and freedom of expression in our religious communities.

It has been pointed out that America is not only the most diverse country in terms of ethnic and religious backgrounds, but also the most devout when it comes to religion.

I believe it is in large measure a result of the freedoms we have enjoyed for more than 200 years. This diverse nation of immigrants can be the model for a world that is becoming one very diverse community.

The artist whose work caught my attention describes her work as follows:

"In this allegorical scene, we see Lady Liberty, personified, her torch ablaze, lighting our way through the darkness; ... She is an 'ideal' that we all look up to and hold dear. ... We see her surrounded by all of us, representing the diverse fabric of our Nation."

It is an affirmation of our diversity, seen as a strength, and built upon our freedoms, including the freedom to worship.

In this Thanksgiving season, we have much to be thankful for. But let us not forget the blessing of our freedoms, the strength of our diversity and our heritage of religious freedom.