



OPINION | LEILA PHILIP

The beauty and power of becoming a US citizen



FRANCESCO ZORZI FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By Leila Philip

FEBRUARY 08, 2017

ON JAN. 11, the Worcester Art Museum hosted its first naturalization ceremony. There in the Renaissance Court, surrounded by art from ancient Rome, I watched 48 people become American citizens. There was a color guard carrying flags, there were babies with red, white, and blue ribbons pinned in their hair, there was a high school music group waiting to perform the national anthem. Adults and toddlers waved small American flags and school

children proudly helped usher in friends and family of the new citizens. I looked up at the swaths of red, white, and blue draping the grand marble staircase and upper balcony, then down to where one of the museum's treasures, a magnificent Roman mosaic of a hunt scene, filled the center of the room. How fitting to stand beside art from this earliest Republic, a floor mosaic from the atrium of a house in Antioch (what was once Syria, now modern Turkey), and watch this most important ritual of our democracy, the beginning of citizenship.

On my left, I could peer through the crowds and see arches leading into an intact Medieval chapter room where, once, 15th-century Benedictine monks had gathered after morning Mass. While to the right, just beyond the rows of men and women waiting to become citizens, I saw the galleries filled with art from India, China, Japan, and Korea. We were surrounded by art from the distant regions of the globe from which these new citizens had traveled.

By the end of this ceremony, these 48 people would be American citizens, guaranteed the freedoms we hold dear: the right to vote, to protest, to have a voice in the judicial process. They would be protected by laws designed to ensure freedom of speech and assembly. They had emigrated here from 23 countries, including China, Uruguay, Poland, the Philippines, Nepal, and Lebanon. This moment marked years of preparation, literally. To become a US citizen you must have resided in the country as a lawful permanent resident for at least five years. You must be able to speak, read, and understand English, prove that you have knowledge of US government and history, and be willing to take the oath of allegiance. Then you must wait. In the past 10 years, the United States has naturalized an average of 680,000 people a year, but that is only a fraction of those waiting to apply.

Soon it was time, the clerk's voice rang out, "All rise!" and the judge entered. Chairs rustled and the quiet became electric; the ceremony had begun. Then the speeches were over and the moment arrived; the judge cleared his throat in preparation for administering the oath of allegiance. Every face turned toward those 48 people, now standing with their right hands raised to cross over their hearts, facing the judge and the American flag. Across the room were all colors of skin, but only one emotion seemed to ripple through the crowd — so much hope! Slowly, in unison, the new citizens began to speak their oath of allegiance to the United States of America, words that would finalize their long journey. The word "so help me God"

barely had time to linger before the room was thundering with cheers and applause. Everyone was clapping, or hugging someone, or shaking hands, or waving flags, or grinning wildly, or openly crying. So many arms were upraised holding cellphones; it looked like a Kanye West concert.

As soon as the hall quieted, the school group began to sing “America the Beautiful.” There was no way to stop my own tears. Was it the fear that our basic American values of democracy and freedom are at risk by this new administration? Or was it the beauty and power of this civic pageant? This was the American dream happening as it has for generations, as it has since the founding of this country. Through the creativity and courage of the museum, I was witnessing what makes America great — immigrant energy and determination — surrounded by art gathered from around the world. What could be more appropriate? I wept out of happiness for these newest citizens, but also because there in the museum on this momentous day for them, I could believe in this urgent hope, I could believe that these American values of “life and liberty for all,” will find a way to outweigh racism, xenophobia, and greed.

Leila Philip is a professor in the English department at the College of the Holy Cross. Her latest book is “Water Rising,” a collaboration with artist Garth Evans.