

# **Artist Concept – Nellie Bly Monument “The Girl Puzzle”**

**by Designer/Sculptor, Amanda Matthews ©**

Nellie Bly told the stories of other women. Now, we will tell hers.

Her first published words on January 25, 1885 were the headline... **“The Girl Puzzle”** This ran in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* newspaper and was in response to an article by Erasmus Wilson, the ‘Quiet Observer’, titled, *“What Girls are Good For”* where he “went on a screed against the working woman -- whom he declared a monstrosity”.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Girl Puzzle*, Bly considers the value of women, advocates for poor working women, and argues that many social advantages are afforded to boys and not girls.<sup>2</sup> Her bold response set the stage for her professional career in journalism, and a lifelong dedication to activism for women’s equality, including suffrage.

Although her life and legacy include broad professional experience as a journalist, women’s rights advocate, suffragist, war correspondent during WWI, inventor/patent holder, industrialist, and humanitarian, a common thread for Nellie Bly is that she experienced the plight of those who are marginalized and wrote stories that would move the needle toward equality and progress, especially for women. Highly regarded as America’s first investigative journalists<sup>3</sup>, she carved a path for the Progressive Era. She gave a voice and a face to women who had no visibility or prominence in society.

**“I determined then and there that I would try by every means to make my mission of benefit to my suffering sisters.”<sup>4</sup> Bly**

My concept is to represent *The Girl Puzzle* in monumental scale, as a sculptural installation that invites the viewer to experience many examples and nuances of Nellie Bly’s talent, conviction, and compassion. As the viewer enters the 60’ long walkway into the space, they encounter four, giant 7’ tall female faces – each representing different ages and ethnicities – two on each side. A fifth giant face is Nellie Bly, at the far end.

Nellie’s face is cast in silver bronze, and the other four faces are cast in bronze. Each of the faces – rendered in partial sections that appear like giant puzzle pieces – show a depth of emotion and complexity of being broken and repaired. Alone and together, they represent parts of The Girl Puzzle.

The entrance of the walkway is 20’ wide and narrows to 10’ wide at the other end, with a short wall no taller than 2’, running the length of the installation on both sides. Rising up from the center of the walkway are three mirror-polished stainless steel spheres. These elements lead the viewer into the giant puzzle of female faces.

Each mirrored sphere is a symbol of a significant period in Nellie Bly’s life:

The first, a 2’ sphere in front of Nellie Bly, represents her early career when she was routinely assigned articles to write about the “women’s sphere”<sup>5</sup>, from “flower shows to ladies’ lunches”, and from fashion to gardening.<sup>2</sup> She ultimately declined, and set her sights on New York City for new opportunities, but left the “Quiet Observer” a farewell note:

**“Dear Q. O., I’m off for New York. Look out for me. Bly”**

The second, a 4' sphere in the center of the installation, represents Nellie practicing her own facial expressions in a mirror to feign insanity, in order to be committed to the Blackwell Island Asylum for investigation of their practices. This was her first assignment with the New York World Newspaper, owned by Joseph Pulitzer.

**“So I flew to the mirror and examined my face. I remembered all I had read of the doings of crazy people, how first of all they have staring eyes, and so I opened mine as wide as possible and stared unblinkingly at my own reflection.”<sup>6</sup>**

She later writes, **“That was the greatest night of my existence. For a few hours I stood face to face with “self!”<sup>7</sup>**

The third, a 6' sphere at the entrance, represents Nellie's trip around the globe in 72 days, beating Jules Verne's fictional character in the novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days*. When her manager at the *New York World* explained that it was an impossible trip for a woman, Nellie Bly responded...

**“Very well, start the man, and I'll start the same day for some other newspaper and beat him.”<sup>8</sup>**

Each sphere reflects the 60' puzzle of faces, the viewer, and the surrounding landscape of Manhattan, Queens, Astoria, and other bordering islands. The spheres increase in size as they project outward from Nelly Bly, which represents an amplification of her voice over time.

Along the sidewalls of the 60' walkway are several plaques that highlight Nellie Bly's writing, and speak to her style and conviction. The plaques will also highlight words that are inscribed on the inside of the female faces. Some of the plaques may include:

**“Here would be a good field for believers in women's rights.”**

**“Nonsense! If you want to do it, you can do it. The question is, do you want to do it?”**

**“Energy rightly applied and directed will accomplish anything.”**

**“I vowed there and then women should be equal. Women could not respect themselves or get men to respect them as equal until they had the power to vote.”**

Viewers become part of the puzzle by interacting with the reflective surfaces, contemplating the meaning of the visual and written clues, and finding resonance with its message.

As the viewer approaches and enters the giant puzzle, sections of the monumental faces come together visually at certain vantage points to deliver a fuller view of a female face. Nellie's face in silver gazes over the entirety of the installation. Her silver face is nearly a ghost image compared to the other bronze faces – it represents the spirit behind the idea. The other giant faces are more obvious - they exist *because* she gave them prominence.

The backs of the giant bronze faces will show the marks of their creation - the brushed-in wax, some of the welding and bronze casting marks; vestiges of something handmade. Embedded in the back of each face with American Typewriter font, are words written by Nellie Bly, words that give the faces familiarity. She writes of the people in the courtroom of New York, “I looked around at the strange crowd about me, composed of poorly dressed men and women **with stories printed on their faces** of hard lives, abuse and poverty.”<sup>9</sup>

On the back of the child's face may be written the words that a young girl, confined for four years in the Blackwell Island Asylum, spoke to Nellie Bly *every* morning, **"I dreamed of my mother last night. I think she may come today and take me home."** <sup>10</sup>

And on the back of the older female face may be written, **"While I live I hope."**<sup>11</sup>

Along the broken edges where the puzzle pieces of the faces fit together, there will be an indication of a beautiful, golden seam. This honors the Japanese practice of Kintsugi, or "golden repair", where pottery is repaired with gold-dusted lacquer, and the imperfections are celebrated as more beautiful and valuable than before.

Author Tyra Lane-Kingsland mentions Nellie Bly in relation to this practice in which she compares Ms. Bly as offering to become "broken" to possibly bring healing to others, when she uncovered the horrors of the (Blackwell) Asylum.<sup>12</sup>

Nellie Bly herself writes about her love of Japan, its pretty customs, and modes of life in *Around the World in 72 Days*, where she says, "If I loved and married, I would say to my mate: Come, I know where Eden is," and like Edwin Arnold, desert the land of my birth for Japan, the land of love-beauty-poetry-cleanliness."<sup>13</sup>

She devotes a considerable description to her inspirational visit "to Kamakura to see the great bronze god, the image of Buddha...", "built in 1250 by Ono Goroyemon, a famous bronze caster". Nellie gives great details of the face being eight feet long, the eye of four feet, and lists the sizes of the giant ears, nose, and mouth. She describes seeing the hollow interior of the sculpture "fitted up with tiny altars".<sup>14</sup> In The Girl Puzzle installation, the many "tiny altars" inside the giant, hollow female faces, will be her written words.

"It would fill a large book if I attempted to describe all I saw during my stay in Japan," writes Ms. Bly. Then she gives additional space to the description of the mirrors of Japanese women, "in which they view their numerous charms. Their mirrors are round, highly polished steel plates, and they know nothing whatever of glass mirrors."<sup>11</sup> Another symbol referenced by the large, mirrored globes.

The Girl Puzzle installation, as an entire space, captures the spirit of a Japanese Zen Garden. Its stylized landscape contains clean lines, short walls, and simple elements that rise up from the ground; all carefully placed to create an evocative work of art that draws the viewer into a state of contemplation. This space honors Nellie Bly by presenting, on a monumental scale, faces of many women who are imperfect, but stronger for it. It is dually inspired by her incredible response to bigotry that became the catalyst for her success, *The Girl Puzzle*.; and by her seminal work, *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, that shaped her life of dedication and empathy for others.

**"I left the insane ward with pleasure and regret – pleasure that I was once more able to enjoy the free breath of heaven; regret that I could not have brought with me some of the unfortunate women who lived and suffered with me..."**<sup>15</sup>

Nellie Bly died on January 27, 1922. The following day, the *Evening Journal* newspaper carried a tribute by Arthur Brisbane, which I would like to include beneath her silver face...

"Nellie Bly was THE BEST REPORTER IN AMERICA and that is saying a good deal... She takes with her from this earth all that she cared for, an honorable name, the respect and affection of her fellow workers, the memory of good fights well fought and of many good deeds never to be forgotten by those that had no friend but Nellie Bly. Happy the man or women that can leave as good a record."<sup>16</sup>

End

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**NOTE:** On the backs of each of the faces will be written words by Nellie Bly. This will also be included on ADA-approved Braille plaques in front of each of the giant bronze faces and next to a 13" bronze casting of each face for the visually impaired, for wheelchair accessibility, and for children:

On the back of the child's face may be written the words that a young girl, confined for four years in the Blackwell Island Asylum, spoke to Nellie Bly every morning, **"I dreamed of my mother last night. I think she may come today and take me home."**

On the back of the older female face may be written, **"While I live I hope."**

On the back of Nellie Bly's face may be written:  
**"I have never had but one desire, and that was to benefit humanity."**

On the back of the African American female face may be written:  
**"I walked with the grace of a queen past the crowd that had gathered, curious to see the new unfortunate."**

On the back of the Asian American female face may be written:  
**"I... gave a despairing farewell glance at freedom as we came in sight of the long stone buildings."**

Additional quotes from Nellie Bly:  
"I said I could and I would. And I did."

"I always had a desire to be convinced that the most helpless of God's creatures, the insane, were cared for kindly and properly."

"I shuddered to think how completely the insane were in the power of their keepers, and how one could weep and plead for release, and all of no avail, if the keepers were so minded."

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1 <http://mentalfloss.com/article/63759/story-launched-nellie-blys-famed-journalism-career>

2 <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/04/30/nellie-bly-letter/> *What Girls are Good For: 20-Year-Old Nellie Bly's 1885 Response to a Patronizing Chauvinist*

3 <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/590464/nellie-bly/> *Nellie Bly, America's First Investigative Journalist*, The Atlantic Series Review of film, *Undercover in an Insane Asylum*, by Director, Penny Lane

4 *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, author Nellie Bly, 2017 Nouveau Classics, page 49

5 *Bylines, A Photobiography of Nellie Bly*, National Geographic, Washington DC, page 19

2 <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/04/30/nellie-bly-letter/> *What Girls are Good For: 20-Year-Old Nellie Bly's 1885 Response to a Patronizing Chauvinist*

6 *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, author Nellie Bly, 2017 Nouveau Classics, page 8

7 *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, author Nellie Bly, 2017 Nouveau Classics, page 17

8 *The Complete Works of Nellie Bly*, reprinted 2015 by CreateSpace Independent Publishing, Lexington, KY, page 9

9 *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, author Nellie Bly, 2017 Nouveau Classics, page 23

10 *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, author Nellie Bly, 2017 Nouveau Classics, page 82

11 *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, author Nellie Bly, 2017 Nouveau Classics, page 67

12 <https://www.inspiredtolivefully.com/the-beauty-in-brokenness/> *The Beauty in Brokenness*, Tyra Lane-Kingsland

13 *The Complete Works of Nellie Bly*, 2015 by CreateSpace Independent Publishing, Lexington, KY, page 94

14 *The Complete Works of Nellie Bly*, 2015 by CreateSpace Independent Publishing, Lexington, KY, page 96-97

11 *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, author Nellie Bly, 2017 Nouveau Classics, page 67

15 *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, author Nellie Bly, 2017 Nouveau Classics, page 7

16 *Bylines, A Photobiography of Nellie Bly*, National Geographic, Washington DC, page 57