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Public Artwork: What to Do About Confederate Statues

Contributing to a community's identity, public art reflects the history and stories we choose to prioritize, memorialize and give a voice to. A significant portion of the United States' public art sphere includes divisive statues that memorialize soldiers and war generals that no longer reflect the values of our nation. The decision of what to do with these statues remains a widely debated discussion embroiled with a complex history and a surge of destruction. Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, there has been a rise in the illegal destruction and lawful removal of these statues as U.S. citizens condemn our nation's oppressive history with nearly one hundred Confederate monuments were removed from public land in 2020 (SPLC, 2019). Those in favor of the sanctioned removal of these statues argue that their absence shows our nation is evolving and distancing itself from mythological ideology such as the "Lost Cause". On the other end of the argument, there is the belief that the destruction and removal of these statues has gone too far and displays an ignorance of American history. As public artwork is indicative of the pride our nation holds and the history we want to honor, these statues should be removed. Their removal acts as a formal declaration that the controversial statues do not align with our country's values and is a step toward positive change.

Often found in public parks or landscapes where the general population may run into them on their commute to work or taking their kids to play, these statues stand tall and cast a shadow over the evolution of our society. Public statues that memorialize historical figures shape

our opinions about history and the narratives we choose to protect. Scholars in favor of these statues removal note that removing these statues does not mean their history of oppression will be forgotten. As a country, the US places high importance on cultural history and heritage and its safeguard from harm, but the laws and protections put in place are a means through which controversial memory sites and public artwork are shielded from justified attempts to have them removed (Leyh, 2020). These protections may seem like an altruistic attempt to preserve cultural heritage, but they reflect how the law is used to reinforce dominant narratives and positions of power. With the rise of the BLM movement and the public protest and destruction of these statues, some scholars are calling for a human rights approach to public artwork and memorialization. They argue that “[community] participation should take part at all decision-making stages as a way to empower civil society voices” (Leyh, 2020). Community-wide discussion and involvement regarding the removal of these statues should not be hindered by repressive and rigid legal processes. In addition to the removal of the statues themselves, there is a call to make avenues for conversation and deliberation of these public monuments more accessible to the greater community.

As public artwork and memorialization act as visual commentary on the narratives we choose to give a platform to, the removal of these statues from public landscapes means we are shifting the narrative away from one that protects and projects racism. An intersection between the arts and continuous community dialogue, those who call for the removal of these statues are not “waging war on statues. They’re waging war on stories” historian Julian Haytner told Business Insider. These statues, built to last in public spaces, may be standing without context but they were specifically designed to tell a story, rewrite history, and justify racial segregation (Abadi et al., 2020). Addressing the need for the removal of these statues is a step toward dealing

with the symbols of white supremacy and oppression. Some fear though that the removal of these statues means their history is likely to be lost.

Those who desire for these statues to remain where they stand believe they provide an educational opportunity for our country. The removal of these statues “would make them more likely to be forgotten, thus forfeiting opportunities for citizens to continue to recognize and reflect on past injustice and their present and future consequences” (Enslin, 2020). Supporters of these statues argue that their destruction does not erase the actions that make them controversial, but it does have the potential to hinder our memory of them. These monuments, if they remain in place, can sponsor long-term educational engagement in a more accessible way than in a museum or a history book. If museums were to become the new homes for these statues they are likely to provide a less dynamic social space, as these statues are often large and commanding of the public space, prompting those in the surrounding space to further investigate their presence. Whereas in a museum, Enslin argues, the statues will have to compete for visitor’s attention.

Beyond forgetting our country’s history if we opt to remove these statues, there is an argument made that their removal is a sheer display of ignorance for our country’s history. Henry Olsen, a columnist for the Washington Post, argues that “Just about every pre-modern political regime was predicated upon the idea that its purported superiority justified treating outsiders over whom it ruled as if those people were not human beings. Modern Western civilization and its revolutionary ideals, however, have allowed for the peaceful, pan-racial democracies protesters say they want” (2020). He notes that this achievement of “peaceful” democracy is an achievement that was granted to us by the ideals of men whose statues we are calling to remove. If we elect to destroy and remove these statues from public spheres we are disrespecting the history behind what it has taken to build the “just nation in which we live and seek to improve”

(Olsen, 2020). However, it is not the presence of these statues that is solely responsible, and the driving force, for our remembrance of racist and oppressive atrocities. Placing the educational responsibility on someone who is walking through a park to see these statues, stop, read their plaque, and educate themselves should not be the method by which we desire to preserve history, especially since it perpetuates oppression.

These statues do not need to be left in place to serve educational purposes. Historian Karen Cox reminds us that even with the removal of physical symbols from the Jim Crow era such as “colored only” signs, we have not forgotten their impact (Abadi, et al. 2020). When we talk about the morality of these Civil War statues, it is important to consider when and why they were erected. While some were erected soon after the Civil War, a majority were not constructed and displayed until “a generation later when civil rights laws and progress was beginning to be reversed” (Abadi et al., 2020). These statues were erected as a physical reinforcement and reminder of white supremacy capitalizing off of trickle-down “Lost Cause” ideology that minimizes the role racism played in both the Civil War and the honoring of its Confederate leaders.

When we leave these statues untouched we are contributing to the oppressive purposes that these statues were built to serve. For those who fear that removing these artworks from our public landscapes means that our history will be forgotten, I argue that the national process of removal can act as an educational and historical movement in the right direction. It is not appropriate to leave these monuments standing absent of context but designed and placed to tell an oppressive story. Reminiscent of the popular debate around separating art from the artist, the separation of these statues from their historical context and the context in which they were ordered to be built is a barrier to our country’s progress and a hindrance to our historically

accurate education. These statues were not simply art pieces built to memorialize the lives of American soldiers. They were erected in large numbers during the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights movements of the 50s and 60s making it clear there was something more sinister going on (SPLC, 2019). Because these statues lie on public land, their presence speaks volumes about what our government deems important.

It is naive to think that we can separate public artwork of Confederate symbols and figures from the values and ideals of white supremacy. The reevaluation and removal, whether permanent or into a museum where they can be properly educationally contextualized, can also set a precedent for the type of artwork that is appropriate to display on public landscapes. As public artwork has the power to educate various communities and push certain narratives it is essential that we are displaying artwork that is representative of our country's values. Public artwork that does not align with our ideals must be addressed and placed within the context in which it was created, and in the case of racist Confederate statues, removed.

References

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