

# Concerning Confederate Monuments

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**M**UCH OF THE ARGUMENT SURROUNDING the current controversy and removal of Confederate statues across the nation concerns our understanding of history: its definition, its context, its purpose and its relationship to the promise of our Bill of Rights. As such, there are understandable emotional sides to each of these questions. This essay will not purport to solve any of these issues, nor persuade any side to alter its view. Rather, it seeks to identify several complexities of the debates and actions already underway, so that we might more completely discuss the effects, both direct and indirect, of the process through which we make decisions about the role of public art in public space. While there is undoubtedly more to be said, three issues will be examined here that, to this point, have been absent in comments offered by politicians and media outlets concerning this topic.

## What is public space?

The very idea of public space itself begins in the ancient world, and was discussed by Plato and Aristotle alike. However, in modernity, two divergent concepts have come to define our collective understanding of this term. Hannah Arendt, in her seminal 1958 book *The Human Condition*, refers to public space as a collective human-made arena



Figure 1 Henry Merwin Shrady, assisted by Edmund Amateis, and architect William Pearce Casey. Cavalry Charge, Ulysses S. Grant Memorial, Washington, DC. Installed 1916. Photo: Wally Gobetz, Flickr/Creative Commons.

wherein politics can be argued openly in order to form a consensus that binds a society. In this psychological context, public space is an active, contested and highly charged arena.

Somewhat conversely, urban planners and sociologists attempt to develop public space as neutral space. Ray Oldenburg offers this perspective in his influential 1989 book *The Great Good Place*, wherein he states that cities must offer their residents neutral ground on which to gather where all feel at home and are comfortable. This is the “third place” theory, enveloping public parks and community centers built for relaxation, and as respite from the pressures of the home and workplace.

Of course, Arendt’s public space is theoretical, while Oldenburg’s is physical. However, each carries significant analogies to our debate over Confederate monuments. In Arendt’s context, Confederate statues would seem to belong in the public realm, and with it their references to racism and slavery that form historical and (unfortunately) contemporary worldviews. But absent equal attention to monuments that champion civil rights leaders and progressive movements, there is a “spatial” inequality. Symbolically that spatial inequality (the absence of monuments countering the confederate worldview) supports the political and racial inequality that continues to exist in our present situation.

In the context of Oldenburg's third place, these statues should not exist in the public realm specifically because of their lack of neutrality and inclusiveness. Whatever one's opinion, one cannot deny that these are highly charged works of portraiture that identify not only with an individual, but also to the cause that he represented. Neutrality would seem to require artwork that is vaguely affirming, positive, and offers a temporary eradication of the conflicts of the everyday. But can such a utopian consensus be found by a pluralistic nation at war with its own history? Whatever one's view, it is important to note which of the two conceptions of public space one defers to, as it will also affect our future built environments.

### **What is public art?**

Public art factors into our everyday lives, whether we live in large urban cities or smaller rural towns. Governments of all sizes have adopted policies whereby the embellishment of public spaces with fountains, sculptures and murals offers education, commemoration and the beautification of the built environment. The factors by which decisions are made are relegated to a committee of stakeholders in any given municipality. Examining the mission statements of four public art programs across the country in Denver, Atlanta, Birmingham and Chicago it is easy to discern that all of these public art programs are sincere in their attempts to enhance community. On their documents one will find the terms diversity, richness and engagement as part of their criteria for judgment. Atlanta's program specifically promotes a "public initiative of outreach and education while working to preserve the city's cultural heritage."

If cultural heritage is a major factor in a public art program, it can be argued that heritage, because it is in flux, should be presented historically over timelines that show both past and present shared traditions. Enter now the sticky issue of the history of our nation. What was once consistent with our cultural heritage (slavery) is no longer so. The argument that Confederate monuments mark history is compelling on its surface, but when examining the visual objects themselves, they seem to lack educational value. Most often they fall into a propagandistic state, the byproduct of their inconsequent depictions as heroic, noble statesmen. The sculptures themselves provide no semblance of context to the greater histories their supporters purport to conserve; namely, the brutal war fought by the South to preserve the lawfulness of owning human beings. Simply put, that information is often not there. It's neither a good nor a bad history that is being preserved, but rather, no history at all, as history can only be understood in the context of a story. In contrast, other public art memorials, such as the Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. memorials in Washington D.C., are heavily contextualized by quotations from the



Figure 2 Laura Gardin Fraser (1889-1966), sculptor of three relief portrait plaques of lawgivers in the House Chamber: Colbert, Edward I, and Papinian.  
Photo: Architect of the Capitol, public domain.

individual that adorn each structure, which provide historical and geographical background for the actions of their namesakes. If cultural heritage, vis-a-vis public art, is what we desire to preserve, that heritage should be preserved in its totality.

### **What is a public artist?**

Perhaps most absent in conversations surrounding the removal of Confederate statues is any deference to the legacy of the artist who created the work itself. Presumably, this slippage is the result of the public marrying an artist's personal views to the subject matter inherent in the artwork he or she produces. Public art is often a commissioned process, wherein an agency requires the skills of a particular artist to execute a pre-approved composition. The result is a work that is physically owned by a municipality, but cedes certain rights, under the Visual Artist Rights Act of 1990, to its maker. Today VARA prohibits the intentional destruction of a work of art even by its owner, but prior to this, no such protection exists.

But is it possible to separate the artist from the artwork? Historically, the answer is yes. Among every museum's greatest treasures are works of art created by murderers, racists, sexists and otherwise deplorable human beings. We should not be inclined to assume that artists who sculpted Confederate memorials were advocates for their causes; nor should we assume that they were not. It is imperative, however, that we consider them as an integral part of the issue currently under scrutiny.

Activists on both sides of this issue might find it surprising to note that the artist of the Charlottesville statue, Henry Shrady, also created the public sculptures of George Washington at Valley Forge, sited at the Continental Army Plaza in Brooklyn, New York, and the Ulysses Grant Memorial at the United States Capitol in Washington D.C (Figure 1). Shrady was an artist of consummate skill and energy, active in the Beaux-Arts Renaissance of American history. Of similar note, the monument to Stonewall Jackson, recently removed in Baltimore, was sculpted by a woman, Laura Gardin Fraser, the first woman to design a minted coin in the United States (Figure 2). Gardin Fraser beat out six prominent male sculptors for the commission, including Paul Manship (who later chaired the board of the Smithsonian American Art Museum). As the practice of removing monuments will no doubt continue, we should be clear about the removal of art history, and of the work of potentially significant American artists, along with it. **A**