

Unboxing the Canon—Episode 3—"Tear Down the Monuments!"  
September 23, 2020  
Created by Linda Steer

(Playing: Instrumental jazz music—Night in Venice by Kevin MacLeod)

"Unboxing the Canon" takes a closer look at the history of Western art. We might be seduced by the pretty packaging, such as soft brush strokes, brilliant colors, grand gestures, expert carving, even traditional iconography. But what happens when we take a deeper look? When we open the packaging and see what might have been invisible, or what is a cultural blind spot? Join Professor Linda Steer and listen in for a take on art history that connects the past to the present, critiques the canon, and reveals what might not be immediately apparent in Western art and its institutions.

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end)

Welcome back!

I'm looking at a photograph that circulated in the news this summer. At the top centre of the photograph, I see a bronze statue of a man on a horse set against a blue sky. The horse is standing atop a symmetrical, elaborately carved granite pedestal. Two columns frame a bronze plaque that is spray painted in white with the letters "BLM" which stands for Black Lives Matter. Below that, there is much more graffiti with words and phrases such as: "love", "blood on your hands", "no more white supremacy", "hold cops accountable", "ACAB" (an acronym for an anti-police slogan), as well as other anti-police statements, peace signs etc. You get the idea. Later photographs of the same site show even more graffiti.

This episode we take a look at the history of monuments and examine some of the issues surrounding monuments today.

This statue of Robert E Lee was installed Richmond Virginia in 1890. For those who might not know, Lee was a general in the Confederate army, an army that led a rebellion against the United States on behalf of the southern states because those states wanted to preserve slavery. The south lost and Lee surrendered in 1865. It was a bloody war with hundreds of thousands of casualties, but in the end 4 million enslaved black people were freed. This is a very brief synopsis of a complex period in US history.

Back to the monument: the entire object is 18 metres tall and the bronze equestrian statue is around 4 m tall. The statue, created by renowned monumental French sculptor Antonin Mercié, was displayed in Paris before it was shipped to USA. The pedestal was designed by French architect Paul Pujol.

The monument was commissioned by the Ladies Memorial Association, an organization of women whose aim was to bury and commemorate confederate soldiers who had died. The United Daughters of the Confederacy, an offshoot of the Ladies Memorial Association, formed in 1894. The United Daughters of the Confederacy was allied with the KKK. So those who raised money and commissioned the statue had connections to violent white supremacist organizations.

That tells us something about the meaning of the monument.

An article in the November 1891 edition of the *American Architect and Building News* claims that the South had difficulty in raising money to commemorate its fallen soldiers. The article states that those who commissioned the statue wanted it to be as large as one of Washington that was nearby. This article from 1891 regards Lee as a traitor especially when compared to Washington. The inability of the south to raise significant amounts of money for commemorative sculpture was seen as indicative of its failure to win the war. So, it is a monument to a failed general in a failed war, but it depicts him as heroic. That is interesting because attempts to reframe Lee as a hero and not as a traitor and to claim that he was heroic continue today.

Now let's jump to about 130 years later.

(Now Playing: A sound clip of people gathered together and chanting, "Say his name! George Flyodd!" in unison).

(Sound clip fades to an end).

In the summer of 2020, many monuments in Richmond were removed as the result of black lives matter protests that erupted after George Floyd, an unarmed 46-year-old Black man in Minneapolis, was ruthlessly killed by police. His crime? He was suspected of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. For 20\$ a police officer knelt on his neck until he could no longer breathe. But Floyd is only one of many black men and women killed by police.

(Now Playing: A sound clip of people chanting "I can't breathe" in unison).

(Sound clip fades to an end).

The only statue that is still standing in Richmond's Monument Avenue is this one. It was the first to be installed and is the last one remaining. Its fate is to be decided in October. Governor Ralph Northam had ordered it removed but that removal was delayed by a court injunction claiming it was supposed to be located on Monument Avenue in perpetuity.

What does this monument signify? Lee's monument contains an equestrian statue, a form of commemoration that we can trace to ancient Rome. These larger than life statues of men on horses were usually created to celebrate an emperor for his military victories. The connection to ancient Rome is important because as Camille Squiers points out in an article in *Mother Jones*, "white landowners of this time saw the Greeks and Romans as their racial ancestors". The statue of Lee suggests that white people are naturally superior. It connects the Confederate army to a glorious Roman past, and honours a man as though he were victorious, when in fact he wasn't. It represents a false narrative.

The removal of Confederate statues in the American South is part of a worldwide movement to confront the violent legacy of colonialism, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the attempted genocide of Indigenous people, and other atrocities committed by Europeans and settlers. In Bristol England, for example, protesters tore down a statue of slave trader Edward Colston and threw it into the harbor. In Belgium, protesters have been removing statues of King Leopold II a 19<sup>th</sup> century ruler who created horrific injustices in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo. Here in Canada, protesters in Montréal toppled a statue of John A. McDonald, Canada's first prime minister who starved Indigenous people in Canada's prairies, and founded Canada's Residential Schools, acts which are now viewed as genocidal.

Monuments honouring men like Lee who fought a war so that people in the South could continue to own other human beings are abhorrent. There is no legitimate reason to allow these statues to continue to stand as is. Something has to be done with them. The only question is what.

What should we do with these monuments now? Some claim that to tear them down is an attempt to change the past, to change or erase history. Others say, well, men like John A. MacDonalld also did good things, such as build the railway in Canada, so we should celebrate that. Others claim the monuments have artistic value and should not be defaced or moved. Let's think about some of these ideas and consider some options.

(Playing: Instrumental electronic music—Eternal by Brady Hoffman)

(Instrumental electronic music ends)

In 2017, after the horrendous violence in Charlottesville, where neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups who had gathered to protest the planned removal of a monument to Lee violently attacked counter protesters, killing one and injuring many others, Artnews put the question to experts: what should we do with these monuments? Their answers were published in an article called "Tear Down the Confederate Monuments—But What Next? 12 Art Historians and Scholars on the Way Forward". The contributors propose a range of responses.

For instance, Jeff Chang, executive director of the Institute for Diversity in the Arts states that it doesn't matter what we do with the statues. What matters is what we do with the conversations we are having about them. He and some of the others quoted in the article realize that there is a lot more to do than remove statues.

Greg Downs, a History prof at UC Davis, notes that even though some of the people depicted in the statues might be admirable, the causes they fought for are abhorrent. He also reminds us that these statues do not represent a history of the south, as some argue. 4 million slaves were also Southerners. Where are they in these monuments? That is a good question.

Like others in this article, Downs proposes contextualizing the statues and providing information about what they represent. But he also maintains that "some of the memorials are so painful that their historical value is minimal compared to the pain they cause".

And, as Nikki A. Green, a professor in the arts of Africa and the African Diaspora at Wellesley College, reminds us, the phrase "putting someone on a pedestal" indicates that we respect their character. Are men like Lee to be respected? Who respects him? And what does it mean to respect a person who fought for the enslavement of others?

Many of the art historians interviewed in this article caution that for many people in America the figure of Lee functions to create terror. Green describes the presence of confederate statues as "looming intimidation."

The subject of public space is an important one. To whom does public space belong? It is supposed to belong to all of us. So, if the space belongs to all of us, how could we have statues that commemorate individuals or causes who sought to enslave, starve or otherwise harm some of us?

Historian Reiko Hillyer brings up the example of Memento Park in Budapest, a park created to house statues of communist figures such as Stalin and other art glorifying the Soviet Union when Hungary was under communist rule. These statues were not destroyed, but they were removed to a place where people could choose to see them and where they could be adequately contextualized. Akos Eleod, the architect of the site claims that "This Park is about dictatorship. And at the same time, because it can be talked about, described and built up, this Park is about democracy. After all, only democracy can provide an opportunity to think freely about dictatorship". This method of preserving, isolating and contextualizing monuments deflates claims about the erasure of history. Keeping the art from the communist era reminds people of the oppressive force of dictatorship and ostensibly will help to prevent it from happening again. Hillyer is concerned that destroying the confederate statues will erase the past and "uphold a myth of white innocence". Removing and

contextualizing the statues might allow for a greater understanding of what the monuments signified when they were erected and how their reception has changed over time.

(Now Playing: A sound clip of people gathered and chanting “Black lives matter” in unison)

(Sound clip fades to an end).

Another historian, Kate Messer, does not agree that taking down the monuments will erase history. She writes that “public monuments make a statement about what a community honors and wants to remember.”

That’s a powerful statement. Something to consider: what and who do we want to remember? What do we want to commemorate? If we truly want truth and reconciliation in Canada, for example, how can we continue with statues that honor a man who starved indigenous people and instigated a system of abuse that still affects Indigenous people today? Because if we keep our statues of John A. MacDonald in our public spaces in Canada, we are perpetuating that abuse – we are legitimizing it.

Sure, some of his actions have merit, but can’t we find Canadians to honor who did harm Indigenous people? Surely, we have some true heroes that we could honor, heroes that can be respected by everyone.

The argument I’m making here is similar to the argument Randy J. Sparks makes in the Artnews article. Sparks, another history professor, acknowledges that his own ancestors were slave owners, and that he wants to neither honour nor forget the past. I’ll read you a sentence from the end of his statement about what to do with Confederate statues: “those monuments are more than a nuisance – they are festering wounds on the body politic, and they need to be excised. No true reconciliation will be possible until we confront all that those statues represent.” We could use these same words to describe statues of John A. MacDonald in Canada.

(Now Playing: A sound clip of people gathered and chanting “No justice, no peace” in unison)

(Sound clip fades to an end).

Several of the art historians quoted in the Artnews article suggest to creating some kind of institution to house Confederate monuments. This would be akin to the park in Budapest, where people could learn about America’s past. As it stands, keeping the monuments in public squares do not clearly represent the past or the present. In public space where people walk or drive around them every day on their way to work, on the way to school etc. they function as painful

reminders of the relationship of the past and the present. They become rallying points for neo-Nazis. They disrupt public space, cause conflict and have little value.

But to put them in a museum with contextualizing information? Are the Confederate monuments worth preserving? From an art historical standpoint, maybe the statue of Lee in Richmond has some artistic merit. It was a uniquely created by an accomplished artist. But what might surprise you is that many of the Confederate statues throughout the American south were mass produced, cheaply made, not unique, and have little to no aesthetic or historical value as material objects. Many of them were installed in the 1960s. What do these more recent statues signify? There's no doubt that their purpose was to create fear and terror, and to remind those in the civil rights era who was in power. Those statues reminded black children going to de-segregated schools that they weren't welcome.

Several of those interviewed in the Artnews article remind us that the tearing down of statues is nothing new – they refer to statues of Stalin, or Hitler or Saddam Hussein. In fact, as Squires writes in the Mother Jones article, the removal of statues goes back to ancient history. I'll read you a little section of the article:

“In 480 BCE, when the Persians ransacked the Acropolis, the Athenians coped with their defeat by turning to ritualistic iconoclasm into a way of demarcating the civilized from the savage. Such iconoclastic activity came to be seen as a paradigmatic example of ‘Oriental’ impiety and violence,” writes art historian Rachel Kousser. The stereotype was cemented in the art of the Parthenon, where images of ransacking Persians sat atop the columns. Says Barnard: “This set up the East-West dichotomy of civilized, not-iconoclastic people against Eastern barbaric, iconoclastic people”.

So, the notion of destroying images or iconoclasm became negative when the Greeks wanted to position the Persians and the destruction of images as something that was not civilized and in opposition to the Greeks – so Eastern. We still think of iconoclasm as a negative word and these negative connotations have a history. Yet those in the west often destroy images during regime changes and war. Many statues of Lenin and Stalin fell along with communism. And statues of French royalty had their noses hacked off by revolutionaries. As art historian Daniel Sherman states in the Artnews article, laws that prohibit the removal of public monuments “fly in the face of the continuous flux to which monuments have been subject for a whole range of reasons practical as well as ideological over the several millennia of their existence”.

We might think of monuments as stable and permanent, yet often they are not.

(Playing: Instrumental jazz music—Night in Venice by Kevin MacLeod).

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end).

In the present moment, the destruction of monuments signifies significant social change. So again, what do we do with the statues? Do we throw them out? We could. We could preserve a few of them in museums along with other relics. That could work.

Another solution is to take down the monuments and put something else up, something that celebrates the social change that is taking place. In Bristol, when the statue of Colston was thrown into the harbour, Black lives matter protestor Jen Reid climbed atop the plinth and raised her fist in the air. Artist Marc Quinn commemorated that moment by creating a black resin sculpture of Reid and placing it on the plinth. The mayor removed it, unfortunately, but it is a good example of what might be done to commemorate a protest that took on colonialism and its legacies.

This makes me think that it might be OK to keep that statue of Lee in Richmond because it has been changed through the graffiti. The layers of graffiti, many more now than when the photo I've been looking at was taken—those layers function as a record of the protests, a kind of public shared memory. The statue has become a meeting place for those who are who are actively making change. For those who chant “Black Lives Matter”. It is a material object that demonstrates historical change while that change is happening. The monument altered, defaced, represents a community coming together to show what they want for their present and for the future. It's no longer a monument that commemorates a nostalgic past, that is a past that never really existed, where Confederate soldiers were worthy of respect rather than traitors or slave owners.

Now I'm looking at another photograph of the Lee monument in Richmond. There is a lot more graffiti on it. Two images are projected onto it: the face of George Floyd onto the pedestal and the letters “BLM” onto the side of the horse. It ceases to be a monument to Lee and becomes a living, changing monument to Floyd, to other Black people who have died at the hands of the police, to the BLM movement that is seeking equality and justice. As a living monument, it is profound, meaningful, and beautiful. It looks to the future rather than to the past. By using projections and graffiti, it moves away from the style of monument that came to be associated with colonial legacies that we need to leave behind.

Maybe then in Canada, in Montreal, the best solution is to leave the decapitated figure of John A. MacDonald as it is, to remind us that although he founded the country, he set in motion the suffering of generations of Indigenous people. To decapitate a representation of someone is symbolic yet harmless. It is nothing next to the violence he incited. Instead let's have new monuments that move towards reconciliation, created by contemporary artists who are Indigenous, or from other underrepresented groups.

(Playing: Instrumental jazz music—Night in Venice by Kevin MacLeod).

Credits:

Unboxing the Canon is hosted and produced by Linda Steer for her course “Introduction to the History of Western Art” in the Department of Visual Arts at Brock University. Brock University is located on the traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples.

Our sound designer and editor is Devin Dempsey, who is also reading these credits. Our logo was created by Cherie Michels. The music for this podcast has been adapted from “Night in Venice” and “Inspired” by Kevin MacLeod. Both are licensed under Creative Commons Attribution International 4.0.

We are grateful to Alison Innes from the Faculty of Humanities for her sharing her podcasting wisdom and offering support.

This podcast is funded by the Humanities Research Institute at Brock University.

(Instrumental jazz music fades to an end).