COMMEMORATIVE SCULPTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 8-12

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INCLUDING THE COMPLETE FIRST LESSON

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INTRODUCTION

APPROACH AND RATIONALE

The National Center for History in the Schools and the Organization of American Historians have developed the following collection of lessons for teaching with primary sources. Our units are the fruit of a collaboration between history professors and experienced teachers of United States History. They represent specific “dramatic episodes” in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turning-point in history the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected dramatic episodes that bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow’s history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from documents, artifacts, journals, diaries, newspapers and literature from the period under study. What we hope to achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to remove the distance that students feel from historical events and to connect them more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of “being there,” a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian’s craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: 1) unit objectives, 2) correlation to the National History Standards, 3) teacher background materials, 4) lesson plans, 5) student resources, and 6) a selected bibliography. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons were developed for use with high school students, they can be adapted for other grade levels.

The Teacher Background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific Dramatic Moment to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.
The lesson plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source documents, any handouts or student background materials, and a bibliography.

In our series of teaching units, each collection can be taught in several ways. You can teach all of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of inevitable facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories, and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.
I. UNIT OVERVIEW

The history of commemorative public sculpture and monuments in the United States is a fascinating story. Americans are proud of their national memorials, like the Lincoln, Jefferson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Vietnam Veterans Memorial located in the nation’s capital. But small communities across America also take pride in their public sculptures and monuments. These monuments and memorials are a part of the fabric of American culture. In 1986, when the Statue of Liberty was restored, many Americans began looking at their own communities for treasures they needed to protect. Out of this was born the Save Outdoor Sculpture Project, sponsored in part by the Smithsonian Institution. Sculptures and monuments once overlooked were now brought to the forefront of many communities’ consciousness. As such, sculptures have been restored at a rapid rate during the 1990s.

Memorials and sculptures not only tell us about the deeds of the past, but they also help us examine our society as it existed at the time these memorials were dedicated. On occasion they can also stir our imagination to rethink the past by reflecting the natural tensions that are part of a democratic society.

This unit should help students see and understand the importance of commemorative public sculpture in the United States. Using examples of some of the greatest pieces located across the United States, students will explore how and why monuments are created and dedicated. They will recognize the place of consensus by either individual communities or memorial committees and will understand that public sculpture in this country is client-patron driven. Students will also explore how controversies arise pertaining to the changing meaning of monuments in relation to our history.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

It is best to use this unit near the end of a survey course in United States history since, in some cases, students will need to be familiar with the historical context of certain people, themes, and ideas. Using this material would assist teachers in pulling together the wealth of material in United States history that has been studied during the school year. Teachers might also wish to use some of the lessons independently, during the school year, when they are studying topic specific themes, such as the West or Lincoln and the Civil War.
III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY

*Commemorative Sculpture in the United States* is a thematic unit examining several standards in the *National Standards for United States History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, National Center for History in the Schools, 1996) that investigate various aspects of popular culture in the study of American history. Material for this unit includes numerous photographs of public sculpture providing students with the opportunity to examine visual data to clarify, illustrate, and elaborate upon information presented in historical narratives. The unit specifically addresses **Historical Thinking Standard 2** in comprehending a variety of historical sources. Students will better appreciate historical perspectives by: 1) describing the past on its own terms through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through diaries, letters, and the arts; and 2) considering the historical context in which the event unfolded—the values, outlook, options, and contingencies of that time and place.

IV. OBJECTIVES

1. To study historical documents, archival images, and other visual material in order to experience history as a dynamic discipline which studies, interprets, and debates the meaning of human events and through those, humanity’s collective past.

2. To recognize the importance of historical memory and commemoration in the United States and how this reflects our place in the world as a people and a nation.

3. To understand how the arts reflect the values of a society at a given place and time.

4. To explain how certain major themes in United States history have been commemorated.

5. How our democratic principle are embodied in public sculpture and monuments by a wide range and variety of images from across the United States.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. Commemoration in the American Democracy

2. An Enduring American Image—The Minuteman

3. The American Pantheon

4. Icons of the West

5. Soldiers of the Civil War

6. The Creation of a National Shrine—The Lincoln Memorial
VI. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON COMMEMORATIVE SCULPTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

Perhaps nothing in the American cultural landscape is more striking than our sculptural monuments. They were at many times in the past, and even in some locales today, regarded as jewels, venerated for the messages they delivered and the visions their promoters articulated. Public sculpture was this country’s first mass-appeal art-form. These works, created and erected to pay tribute, to instruct, to educate, to excite, are a national treasure.

It is estimated that there are over fifteen thousand outdoor sculptures in American cities, towns and villages. Whether for local impact or countrywide appeal, these handmade images stand as eloquent metaphors of our development as a nation. These provocative works of art—in bustling squares and bristling traffic circles, in serene courthouse lawns and on barren concrete plazas—are an integral part of America’s cultural consciousness. Public monuments are acts of celebration—symbols of a country articulating its national identity, with chest-thumping bravado or reverential understatement.

While some monuments have fallen victim to a changing standard of aesthetics and others neglected by shifts in our urban cityscape, public sculptures embodied the rhythm and energy of their age. In its broadest stroke, public sculpture joins the didactic and the decorative. Monuments are embodiments of private tribute and chauvinistic celebration. They helped to define our national character. They address an insatiable need to remember heroes, to promote points of view, to honor well-earned and fleeting victories, to acknowledge, on occasion, shortcomings and even failings. Whether praising or remembering, embellishing or documenting, public sculptures pay homage to reputations earned as well as the talents of artists who translate the instructions of the behind-the-scenes sponsors into tangible reality.

Collectively public statues are a three-dimensional honor-roll of America’s movers and shakers, dreamers and leaders, celebrating the achievements of great men (and too-few women) and the time-tested causes that have captured our national attention. The story of why and how is as important as who, what, where and when.

Much of America’s best figurative sculpture was produced during a three-generation period that began feverishly at the end of the Civil War. This explosion was aided by the arrival in the 1880s of foreign-born bronze casting experts like Riccardo Bertelli and Henry Aucaigne, founders of Roman Bronze Works and Henry-Bonnard Bronze Company, respectively, and by a talented group of stone carvers—the five Piccirilli Brothers (who worked in the Bronx, New York from 1888 to the early 1940s).

It is important to recognize that public sculpture is a patron-generated art. Sculptors never sat in their studios, dreaming up compositions or speculating on projects. The sculptor never initiates; he reacts to a vaguely worded inquiry or responds to a detail-laden proposal. As work progressed, the patron remained engaged; suggestions, refinements, even wholesale changes could be (and often were) proposed by the client.
Inexplicably this system rarely stifled creativity—artist and patron flourished as symbiotic partners. Never having the luxury of working in seclusion, public sculptors made a virtue of their goldfish-bowl existence. Whether over-the-shoulder meddling or circumspect monitoring, the patron’s involvement was a given. The step-by-step production from small design to finished monument provided predictable points of contact, timetables for reviews and schedules of payment.

The task of creating a public memorial is a many-layered undertaking that demands the sculptor be an artistic performer as well as a businessman, contractor, accountant, supervisor and publicist. Far different expectations are asked of a painter who often works in seclusion in a studio, needing only at the end of production to interest a prospective purchaser or to secure a gallery display space. An architect, who negotiates a contract with reassuring words and well-worked renderings often disappears as the builder erects an elegant home or a contractor constructs a grand office building.

The everyday operations of making monuments demand the sculptor be both hands-on laborer and nuts-and-bolts manager, bookkeeper and press publicist. The sculptor became both jack and master of all trades. Except for the upfront payment on signing the contract, funding liability favored the patron. Throughout the labor-intensive modeling stages, when expenses for materials and extra studio services were greatest, monies for the sculptor only trickled in. Only after the monument was erected and the sculptor’s hands-on work long-finished was the largest installment (often as much as fifty percent) tendered. In spite of the unevenness of this monetary playing field, most practitioners of public sculpture prospered.

Making monuments is a multi-stepped operation, commencing with a patron’s first queries and ending, quite often, several years later at an elaborate dedication ceremony. A larger-than-life bronze statue begins as a hand-sized maquette. A two-step enlargement follows as the sculptor creates a midsize, “working” model and a full-scale statue. Procedures hardly vary—modeling in malleable clay, then reproducing the completed work in more durable (but still fragile) plaster.

The early development of monumental sculpture in America was inextricably linked to the technical advances in bronze manufacturing brought on by the Civil War. Prior to 1860, most of America’s sculptures were carved in marble for display indoors. As the cannon-casting industry retooled, the great majority of America’s monuments were made in bronze.

Creating public sculpture is not a dream-world exercise; it is a labor-intensive activity that involves the artist intimately in both the mental and the menial. From courting a client to taking the obligatory bow as the dedication bunting is raised, American sculptors became one-person concert performers. In conceiving and manufacturing public monuments, American sculptors became three-dimensional fact-finders and myth-makers. Unlike the biographer or historian, who might use thousands of words or scores of illustrations to defend a thesis or evaluate a career, public sculptors distilled the essence of their subject in a single summarizing moment; everything available, instantly accessible and irrefutably permanent.
At the dedication of the Robert Gould Shaw Memorial survivors of the 54th Massachusetts paraded past the monument. Artist Augustus Saint-Gaudens recalled the dedication ceremonies:

The impression of those old soldiers passing the very spot where they left for the war so many years before, thrills me even as I write these words. They faced and saluted the relief. With the music playing ‘John Brown’s Body’, a recall of what I had heard and seen thirty years before from my cameo-cutter’s window. They seemed as if returning from the war, the troops of bronze marching in the opposite direction, the direction in which they had left for the front, and the young men there represented now showing these veterans the vigor and hope of youth. It was a consecration.

Memorial Day, 1897
Boston Massachusetts
Veterans of the Massachusetts 54th Volunteer Infantry marching past the just unveiled
Robert Gould Shaw and 54th Massachusetts Memorial by acclaimed American sculptor
Augustus Saint-Gaudens
Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society
The Daughters of the American Revolution refused to permit Marian Anderson, an internationally renowned opera singer, to give a concert in Constitution Hall because of her race. On Easter Sunday, 1939, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes introduced Anderson to 75,000 people in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

Genius, like justice is blind. For genius has touched with the tip of her wing this woman who, if it had not been for the great mind of Lincoln, would not be able to stand among us today as a free individual in a free land. Genius draws no color line. She had endowed Marian Anderson with such a voice as lifts any individual above his fellows, as in a matter of exultant pride to any race. And so it is fitting that Marian Anderson should raise her voice in tribute to the noble Lincoln, whom mankind will ever honor.
LESSON ONE—
COMMEMORATION IN THE AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

Public commemorative sculpture—it’s everywhere in the United States. You can find statues of American heroes not only in cities like Boston or Washington, D.C., but also on town and village squares, in parks, and along our network of interstate highways. No other nation on earth has as wide a variety of public sculptures as does the United States. This diversity of people and events speaks to the heart of the American experience and reflects our national desire, as in all civilizations and cultures, to remember, honor, and cherish the past.

A. OBJECTIVES

♦ To explore various reasons why societies use sculptures and monuments.

♦ To explain why certain images about the United States have enduring appeal.

♦ To study how contention and consensus building have figured recurrently in the building of American monuments and memorials.

B. BACKGROUND MATERIAL

The two central documents for this activity are Document 1, an essay from The American Monument by Leslie George Katz and Document 2, an article “Even Our Most Loved Monuments had a Trial by Fire” by Andrea Gabor. Katz’s book is a photo essay of public monuments and sculptures from across the United States with photographs taken by Lee Friedlander, one of America’s top photographers. Many of the photographs taken before the founding of the Save Outdoor Sculpture Project show monuments run down and in dire need of restoration and conservation. The essay was prepared at the time of the Bicentennial of the United States and reflects what the author felt was important for Americans to think about in that year regarding these works of art. Gabor’s article in the May 1997 issue of Smithsonian recounts the controversy that has often occurred when new national memorials are designed and created.

C. LESSON ACTIVITIES

1. Tell the students that they are going to be studying American public sculpture and monuments. Have each student in the class give you a word that comes to mind upon hearing the words monuments, sculpture, or statue. Write their responses on the board. After you have compiled a list of the words (try not to duplicate each word) tell the students that they do have some prior knowledge about the subject they are about to study.

2. Ask the students to define in their own words the terms memorial and monument. Do they mean the same or different things? Have students explain how their reached their definition. Determine a classroom consensus definition of both words and have students record those definitions in their notebooks.
3. Distribute Document 1, the essay “American Monument,” and Document 2, the article “Even Our Most Loved Monuments had a Trial by Fire.” Have students read the documents silently.

4. Provide students with copies of the two photographs from the “Dramatic Moment.” Ask the students to think about these images after they have read both documents. What emotions do the two monuments elicit? What seems to be the common thread in these photographs? What was the significance of using the Lincoln Memorial for Marian Anderson’s concert?

5. Begin a class discussion by asking students what they think is the main theme of “The American Monument” essay? What is the tone of the author? What kind of appeal is this? Why? Explain how the two photographs of Marian Anderson and the Veterans of the Massachusetts 54th are related to the theme of the essay.

6. Ask students what they think is the main theme of “Even Our Most Loved Monuments had a Trial by Fire”? Are they surprised that in a democracy there are arguments about monuments and memorials? Why might a design for a particular monument be aesthetically appealing to one person but not to another? Why might “politics” enter the arena of design and creation of public monuments? Do they think arguments and disagreements over public monuments only happen with national memorials? Why? Why not? Why might community consensus be important for some memorials but not for others? How are the Gabor and Katz articles similar? How are they different?

7. Form students into groups of four or five. Each group should select one person as a recorder. Ask students to compile a list of public monuments and sculptures that they have seen personally or in pictures. If they have seen a particular monument ask them to describe how they first felt when they saw the monument or memorial. For example, if several students have seen the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. have them compare their impressions. What did they see? What did they feel? Share the group findings with the class.

8. Tell students that emotions are an important part of studying monuments. Artists want to draw something out of them emotionally and that not all are intended to appeal only to the intellect. Ask the students if anything they discovered about monuments in the group activity was validated in their reading of Documents 1 and 2. If so, what? Why? If they had experienced any of these monuments first hand did these monuments reflect the notion of a “civic prayer” as described by Katz? If so, why? How?

9. Conclude the lesson by asking students to think about people and or events that they would like to see commemorated in a public sculpture or monument. (You will come back to this later in the unit.)
The American Monument

All over America, everywhere anyone looks, if you care to see, monuments and memorials in the form of statues and shrines of all sizes and kinds abound. Thousands upon thousands of these uncelebrated icons literally dot the landscape throughout the United States, in small towns and large, village and megalopolis. They inhabit every conceivable location: desert, traffic island, village green, concrete plaza, battlefields, national parks, wayside rests, eight lane superhighways and cowpaths. Some are celebrated as national tourist attractions. Others are anonymous and unnoticed. Most are locally commissioned mementos of contributions to the nation by local persons. Their importance is, they exist. Their meaning is not limited to their worth as works of art.

Each is a prayer to civil history, a reaffirmation of the ultimate provincialism of time, place and personality. In an environment dominated by menacing speed, instability, advertising and television, the American monument plays a meditative role. A grace of intention shines through the ofttimes awkward alliance of efforts that produced them. They are redeemed by the confidence they express in the worth of the act memorialized.

Silent in the din of traffic, clearly observable in the pollution of ten thousand monoxide exhausts, they are also unarmed and vulnerable. In the most joyless cityscape or ravaged landscape they are reminders of sharp human fates as fresh as the green blades of grass that spring from highway cracks and crevices. In their persistence they outlast and overcome dedication ceremonies, immediate neglect, patriotic anniversary wreaths, sentimentality, jeers, epithets, graffiti, the vandalisms of the establishment and the homages of street gangs. To an unsympathetic eye, the ordinary run of American monuments may appear a form of permanent, three-dimensional graffiti perpetrated upon the landscape, conspired, produced and inflicted upon posterity by the worst pretensions of patriotism and art. To others, however, their meaning, stark as poverty, is bone true. They are part of the secret treasure poetry discovers and defends, especially nowadays, when the claim of honor has been so abused the private soul may well be ashamed to honor in public what it still believes, and dishonor has become a most marketable commodity.

In the midst of life as much as a curbstone, a public memorial is a gutter of civic memory, collecting runoffs of communal pride. A lot of unsullied meaning lives in these statues. The heart needs landmarks. The more frenetic the world becomes, the calmer become the monuments. The noisier the advertisements promising instant gratification for a price, the quieter these. People want leadership not only from the living but from the dead. That is why these votive figures remain original, beyond predatory exclamations and crocodile celebrations. When the mind forgets, stone and bronze remember. In the contending chaos every monument, like every tree, even the least, is a kind of oasis. The opposite of the automobile, it is stationary; the world revolves around it. An essence of nativity like a flower, it substantiates the eternity of a given moment, and the irrevocability of deed.

... Monuments are man’s created equivalent of a natural landmark, as rock, spring or dell. As objects they embody the idea of excellences worthy of permanence.
And, they celebrate us. We are the worthy inheritors, or we could be. They remind the viewer that the place he inhabits was inhabited before, his life partakes of the poetry of continuum: someone was here before you who paved the way for you, whose efforts made your being here possible.

In a city park or plaza their patience epitomizes an alternative to sensational desires and rages. While color-television, dayglo billboards and neon lights are ablaze, the monument wears no color but the color of wear. A litter of disposable plastics and metals and papers, the built-in obsolescence of the environment, only emphasize the durability. A bench is almost always nearby: monuments invite rest. Relating the past to the present, the present to the future, their function is civic religion.

On battlefields they present themselves as memorials made primarily for the benefit of the living. Rising out of the soil where soldiers fell at Vicksburg and Gettysburg, the visages and markers are souvenirs countrymen have put up against the obliteration of conscience.

Monuments are metaphors for human values, persistent values that survive despite notice or neglect, unaccounted for by computers, cynicism, or professions of piety. Since outdoor loitering and strolling have been curtailed by the primacy of rights allowed to machines, the monuments which represent these values are encountered, if at all, mostly in passing, from a moving vehicle.

. . . [M]onuments have staying power like an element in the populace, little admitted or celebrated these days, that goes on heroically in a dumb animal way performing the work necessary for the existence of civilization as we know it.

Even Our Most Loved Monuments had a Trial by Fire
by Andrea Gabor

Controversy has been as integral to public art in the United States as bronze and marble. In the 19th century, politicians and art critics sharpened their knives on everything from the now venerable Washington Monument to those seemingly innocuous lions outside the New York Public Library. In fact, trial by fire has been almost a rite of passage for even America’s most beloved monuments and memorials. “Never was a memorial yet erected that was not subject to criticism,” lamented a besieged Rep. John Boylan before Congress in 1937, as he sought to win backing for the Jefferson Memorial. Sixty years later, Bert Kubli, who ran the Art in Public Places section of the National Endowment for the Arts until retiring in 1995, countered: “If no one debates it, why have it? The process and the debate are very much a part of public art itself.”

Of course, Americans haven’t cornered the market on monumental controversies. Even Paris’ signature structure, the Eiffel Tower, was deemed ugly when it went up. But the debates here often turn into high-stakes battles over our values and the very “definition of what it means to be American,” writes Harriet Senie, coeditor with Sally Webster of Critical Issues in Public Art.

One reason for this long history of acrimony is that, in many respects, monument building runs against America’s democratic and puritanical grain. In the early years of the Republic, many Americans viewed any public sculpture as an extravagance. Also, although we have frequently had trouble agreeing on a common identity, nearly all of us have shared a discomfort with the old-world social and religious order depicted in classical sculpture. Finally, the costs and politics of getting a monument built often have led the advocates of a particular project to assume near-autocratic powers.

The fight over the Jefferson Memorial spanned an eclectic range of objections from art criticism to environmentalism. John Russell Pope’s Pantheon-inspired design was derided as an “imitation classical building . . . [that] immortalized the very pomp and pretense [Jefferson] always fought.” Joseph Hudnut, dean of the faculty of design at Harvard University, concurred: “This monument, when completed, will embody so grotesque a presentation of Jefferson’s character as to make him, if such a thing is possible, forever ridiculous.”

Meanwhile, the debate in Congress degenerated into what Representative Boylan called a “showdown” over the destruction of cherry trees around the Tidal Basin, where the memorial was to be located. In 1937, in one long and impassioned defense of the trees, Rep. Allen Treadway proclaimed on the House floor: “I want the House at this time to understand that the people of the U.S. want the Tidal Basin and the cherry blossoms protected and we are going to have them protected by legislation if it is possible to do it.” Boylan shot back that “not a single cherry tree [would] be disturbed.”

In the spring of 1938, after witnessing years of unproductive debate by Congress, a fed-up FDR approved both the site and a modified version of Pope’s design, pushing through a $500,000 appropriation to begin construction. . . . The trees had become a cause célèbre, as people chained themselves to the trunks in protest.
When construction got under way, the National Park Service took to removing the trees at night; eventually, 150 were destroyed or moved.

Ferocious as it was, the battle over the Jefferson Memorial was tame compared with the earlier, century-long war over the Washington Monument. As art historian Kirk Savage has observed, the effort to build a national monument in Washington’s memory became “the most problematic undertaking in the campaign” to develop a national identity. You’d never guess that today; the 555-foot-tall stone shaft has become one of the nation’s most recognizable icons.

Yet, when a monument to the first President was included in Pierre l’Enfant’s plans for the new capital city in 1791, Washington himself objected. He thought that government funds should not be spent for such a project. The trouble was compounded by the monument’s original conception, an equestrian statue with Washington in Roman dress, a truncheon held in his right hand. To many Americans, the design smacked of monarchism and ostentation, inappropriate for depicting the man who was a role model of republican citizenship.

After Washington’s death, battle lines hardened. The proposed statue was championed by the federalists, who favored a grand monument, and opposed by the republicans, who questioned the very act of commemorating a single hero. As the decades wore on, haggling continued. In 1833, a private monument society was formed, bringing in gifts of money and blocks of marble from states and individuals. Fifteen years later, the cornerstone was laid on the monument’s present site. The society had decided on a predictably grand design by Robert Mills: an obelisk rising from a Greek temple, its colonnade encircling a vast rotunda that would house statues and murals of revolutionary heroes. The decision was made to build the obelisk first, and by 1854 the shaft stood at 152 feet. But, that year, progress came to a complete halt when Pope Pius IX donated a block of marble for the monument. Objecting to the “papist gift,” members of the antiforeign, anti-Catholic American Party, known as the Know-Nothings, stormed the monument grounds, stole the papal rock and, it is believed, threw it into the Potomac. The next year, a group of them broke into the society’s offices and seized its records. The project was enmeshed in chaos, and with the onset of the Civil War, work stopped altogether.

The marble stump stood for a quarter-century, a bleak rebuke to the young nation. In the early 1870s, with the centennial of the country approaching, Congress once again took up the issue of what to do with the unfinished obelisk. Some advocated tearing it down and starting over, and proposals flooded in for designs of towers ranging from English Gothic to Romanesque to a structure most closely resembling a Hindu temple.

The monument’s completion in 1884, and its final design, owed much to the tenacity of Lieut. Col. Thomas Casey of the Army Corps of Engineers. As Congress bickered, Casey, who had been charged with supervising construction, drew up a new set of plans based on what had already been built. He envisioned a technological marvel equipped with electric lights and an elevator: an unadorned obelisk that would be the tallest masonry structure in the world. Somehow, this unsung hero persuaded the commission to dispense with the sculptural ornamentation originally planned for the base and, more amazing, to let him build the thing.
A permanent reminder of the interrupted construction is the change in the shade of marble partway up—the original shade couldn't be matched.

In the decades following the Civil War, America overcame its democratic ambivalence to public sculpture. There was virtually no resistance, for example, to the Statue of Liberty, which was dedicated in 1886 on Liberty Island off the tip of Manhattan. In fact, in the aftermath of the war, scores of towns and cities throughout the North, enjoying the fruits of victory and prosperity, rushed to erect sculptures that would commemorate their local heroes.

As the turn of the century approached, publishing tycoons emerged as influential monument builders. Indeed, one of the most dramatic controversies to enmesh a pair of public sculptures grew out of the rivalry between the Hearst and Pulitzer newspaper dynasties—and led to the construction of two monuments that now anchor the southern corners of Central Park, at 59th Street in Manhattan.

The fracas began with an explosion in Havana Harbor in 1898 that sank the U.S. battleship Maine, touching off the Spanish-American War. Within days, William Randolph Hearst launched a subscription campaign to raise money for a memorial, which eventually would be built at Columbus Circle. “Honor The Men Who Died For Their Country On the Battle Ship Maine,” blared the front-page headline of the Evening Journal. (A similar subscription campaign by the Hearst newspapers helped fund Mount Rushmore.)

To whip up support for both the war and the memorial, Hearst’s papers also published distorted accounts of Spanish atrocities. At least, that was the judgment of former President Grover Cleveland, who had resisted intervening in Cuba during his Presidency, and who now refused to endorse Hearst’s project. He would not, he avowed, “allow [his] sorrow for those who died on the Maine to be perverted to an advertising scheme for the New York [Evening] Journal.” Hearst had his fingers in other pies, too; his legendary battles with Tammany Hall and his political ambitions (he even ran for mayor against Tammany’s candidates) delayed completion of the memorial for more than a decade.

While the political fights over the memorial eventually abated, a furor over its artistic merits raged until the end. Shortly before the monument was unveiled, the New York Times condemned the work as an “unsightly object . . . a monstrous combination of monumental masonry and plastic craftsmanship” whose horses like “poor gored beasts of the Spanish bull rings vainly trying to regain their footing.”

Meanwhile, not to be outdone, Joseph Pulitzer had also entered the fray as Hearst was locking horns with the mayor’s office to get the Maine Memorial built. The Pulitzer Fountain was an exercise in simplicity, with its lone statue of Pomona, the Roman goddess of tree fruit. Proof perhaps that one can occasionally do the right thing for the wrong reasons, it met little resistance form either art critics or the public, and is now one of the best-loved public spaces in Manhattan.

If the heavy hand of two tycoons helped to redefine 59th Street, farther downtown the design of two lions outside the New York Public Library was undermined by the reticent personality of their sculptor, Edward Clark Potter. Shy and reclusive, Potter preferred animals to humans, at least as artistic subjects. Best known for
crafting the bottom half of the Equestrian sculptures designed by his more famous contemporaries, such as Daniel Chester French, Potter was a natural choice to design the two library cats. But even before he had put chisel to stone, the cats were attacked. Theodore Roosevelt, who loved hunting big game, made it known that he favored elk or moose as guardians of the library. Another group lobbied for a pair of industrious beavers.

As Potter cold-shouldered newspaper reporters, the minor cat fight soon evolved into a leonine brawl, and the lions became scapegoats for a whole host of objections centering as much on the design of the library itself as on them. When they were finally unveiled in 1910, the press heaped insults on the two cats, deriding them as “absurd” looking and as “mealy-mouthed, complacent creatures.” . . . *American Art News* printed a letter to the editor that said, “I have suspected for some time that the model of the good natured lions . . . was a stuffed one.”

But within a few years of Potter’s death in 1923, the pair of lions had won the hearts of the city dwellers, becoming a favorite rendezvous spot. . . . During World War II, one soldier who was about to be shipped out and couldn’t show up at a meeting with his girlfriend sent a telegram to her “Care of the North Lion, Public Library.”

As a general rule, debate usually slows down the building of a monument, especially in Washington, D.C., where “debate as obstruction” is a high art form. In a notable exception, however, the most passionately contested monument in recent times—The Vietnam Veterans Memorial—was also built more quickly than any other in the city’s history. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, announced by veteran Jan Scruggs in May 1979, attracted some powerful supporters, including a group of Vietnam veterans from West Point who enlisted the help of several key senators. But then the fund held a competition, in which a panel of art and architecture experts chose from among 1,400 entries submitted blind. Maya Lin’s winning design, a polished, black granite wall inscribed with the names of those who died in Vietnam, was lambasted by critics as a “black gash” and a “tribute to Jane Fonda.” Members of the selection panel were excoriated by author Tom Wolfe as “mullahs of modernism” responsible for the selection of this “enormous pit” as a memorial. Opponents of the design included Texas billionaire Ross Perot, who lost a close friend in Vietnam. It was a vicious debate, an argument that seemed to unleash years of pent-up rage and battling perceptions over the legacy of the Vietnam War. But, in the end, only 3 1/2 years had passed from the beginning of fundraising until completion in 1982. In 1984, Frederick Hart’s grouping of three soldiers, which was commissioned to mollify those who wanted a representational memorial, was positioned to face Maya Lin’s minimalist wall, as though the soldiers, too, are reading the names etched into it. Today, the Vietnam Veterans memorial is the most visited monument in the country. According to Bert Kubli and other public-art experts, the memorial benefited from the debate that engulfed it. No other monument in America, says Kubli, is so clearly “the end product of a long, exciting, very democratic, and very American process.” . . .

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