



Monuments:

Commemoration and Controversy

*A traveling exhibition
organized by the
New-York Historical Society*

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A new exhibition at the New-York Historical Society revises the assumption that the current debate about controversial public monuments is in any way new.

— Hyperallergic, February 1, 2022

Johannes Adam Simon Oertel (1823–1909), *Pulling Down the Statue of King George III, New York City*, ca. 1852–1853, oil on canvas, 32 x 41 1/4 in., Gift of Samuel Verplanck Hoffman, 1925.6



Christopher Columbus. Robert E. Lee.
Theodore Roosevelt. James Marion Sims.
Thomas Jefferson. John C. Calhoun.
Debates continue to rage over public statuary in the United States—over whose faces and experiences are monumentalized, what fate awaits contested monuments, and who should decide.

These contemporary debates have a long history that dates to the founding of the nation. *Monuments: Commemoration and Controversy* explores this connection between past and present. It looks at once back to the deep history of protest against monuments and forward to present-day efforts to call attention to stories long suppressed.

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The objects featured range from a model for a modern recreation of a statue of King George III torn down by American Revolutionaries in 1776 to contemporary maquettes by Alison Saar, Barbara Chase-Riboud, and Kara Walker for monuments to abolition and slavery. In between is a statuette of a monument portraying an Indigenous hunter created during an era of “Indian Removal,” a reduced cast of the Statue of Liberty, and a souvenir replica of a bulldozed monument by Harlem Renaissance sculptor Augusta Savage. As a group, the objects broach such topical issues as empire, democracy, settler-colonialism, religion, and race.

Through these key works and accompanying paintings, photographs, prints, and other artifacts, the exhibition unpacks the ways that monuments have served for centuries as flashpoints of fierce debate. It invites visitors to consider today’s controversies—manifested in the continued celebration, attack, protest, alteration, and removal of monuments—as part of a longstanding, ongoing, and collective process of shaping and reshaping public history.

Alison Saar, (b. 1956),
*Maquette for Swing Low:
Harriet Tubman Memorial*, 2007,
bronze, 22 1/4 x 24 x 13 1/2 in.,
Purchase, 2009.34

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Direct interrogatives—about the making and erasure of history, the destruction of monuments, and how new monuments can change history—position visitors as participants in the conversation. The size of the key objects shifts the standard hierarchy of scale between viewer and monument to prompt not sublime awe but critical reflection. An empty pedestal encourages engagement with the future of monuments. An app called Kinfolk invites museum-goers to envision augmented reality monuments to Black and Brown heroes on the pedestal. And the prompt “What should stand on a public pedestal?” welcomes visitors to write their answers on sticky notes and place them directly on the structure, transforming it into a piece of community-driven installation art and space for democratic exchange.

King George III

American Revolutionaries tore down a statue of King George III. They had just listened to a public reading of the freshly written Declaration of Independence and, passions inflamed, toppled the monument from its pedestal. It was an act of symbolic overthrow. They beheaded the statue, broke it into pieces, stripped off the gold leaf, and carted the lead from New York to Connecticut to be made into bullets for the Continental Army. Only fragments of the monument, like the horse’s tail, remain. The event raises questions resonant with today’s culture wars: Did New Yorkers make history that day by reshaping the public landscape to democratic ideals and a new political order? Or did they erase history by destroying a symbol of their imperial past?

Joseph Wilton (1722–1803),
Horse’s tail from the equestrian
statue of King George III,
1770–1776, lead, 8 x 6 x 28 1/2 in.,
Museum purchase, 1878.6



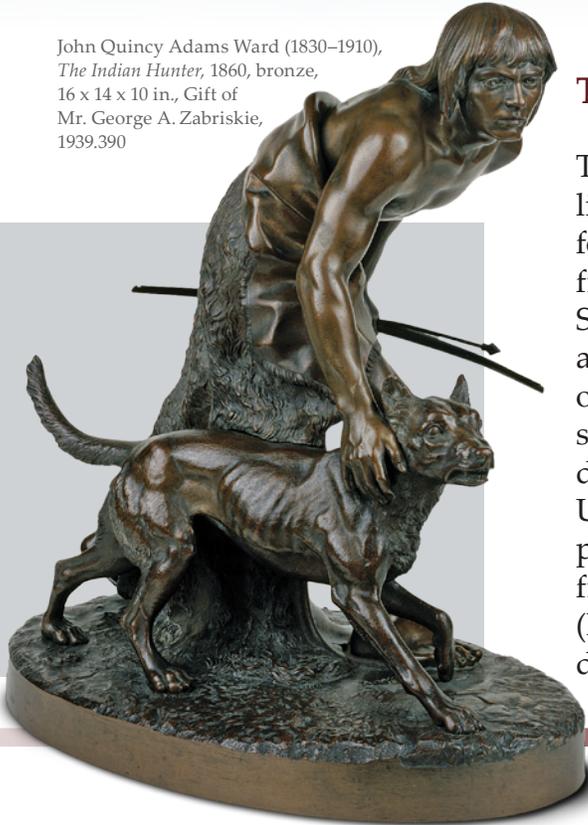
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John Quincy Adams Ward (1830–1910),
The Indian Hunter, 1860, bronze,
16 x 14 x 10 in., Gift of
Mr. George A. Zabriskie,
1939.390



The Indian Hunter

This statuette inspired a monumental version based on life studies made in the Dakota Territory. Often praised for its realism, John Quincy Adams Ward's vision of a free-roaming Indigenous hunter conflicts with the United States' brutal subjugation of Indigenous peoples. The artist created the sculpture amid white American settlers' ongoing efforts to subdue Indigenous communities through strategic policies of violence, forced assimilation, and land displacement. The statuette is shown against a map of the US reservation system and alongside a contemporaneous painting of the New England Pilgrims. This grouping is framed by a commissioned poem from LaVerne Whitebear (Pabaksa Dakota/Wadopana Nakota/Arikara), which directly addresses the Pilgrims.

The Statue of Liberty

Officially titled *Liberty Enlightening the World*, the Statue of Liberty was designed to commemorate not immigration but Enlightenment ideals. A gift from France, it honored the triumph of freedom in the United States—including Union victory in the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. *Monuments* explores the disconnect between this meaning and the lived reality of Black Americans at the time of its unveiling. It looks also at the incongruity between the statue's symbolism as a monument to immigration and the United States' federal immigration policies: Emma Lazarus' famous poem was emblazoned on the pedestal in 1903, at the height of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi (1834–1904),
Liberty Enlightening the World, 1878–1886, copper-plated zinc,
12 x 39 5/8 x 12 in., Purchase, 1937.85



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Augusta Savage (1892–1962),
Lift Every Voice and Sing, ca. 1939,
white metal cast with a black patina,
10 3/4 x 9 1/2 x 4 in., Coaching Club
Acquisition Fund, 2019.90. Photo
courtesy of Swann Galleries



Lift Every Voice and Sing

The only commission at the 1939 New York World's Fair by a Black woman artist, Augusta Savage's towering monument to Black music was seen by over five million people and proved one of the most popular works on display. But Savage didn't have the funds to preserve the sculpture, and it was smashed by bulldozers at the close of the fair. It survives only in the form of small-scale souvenirs. This section grapples with the loss of monuments and raises questions about whose stories are preserved in the public sphere.

Monuments to Slavery and Abolition

The final section features maquettes by Alison Saar, Barbara Chase-Riboud, and Kara Walker. Saar honors Harriet Tubman in a model for New York City's first monument to a Black woman. Barbara Chase-Riboud envisions a never-realized monument to Sojourner Truth. And Walker marks a site of trauma—where enslaved people were quarantined before their transfer to slave markets—in a New Orleans landscape otherwise wiped clean of that history. Together, these contemporary Black artists highlight underrepresented heroes and buried histories. Their art prompts reflection on the structures of power that have historically excluded faces and experiences of color from our public places—and the work being done to dismantle them.



Barbara Chase-Riboud (b. 1939),
Maquette (Sojourner Truth Monument), 1999, bronze,
20 x 24 x 14 in., Purchase, 2007.13



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EXHIBITION DETAILS

Contents:

The traveling exhibition includes 29 objects (sculptures, paintings, historical artifacts, works on paper, and a fabricated pedestal), 20 digital files (17 files for the digital slide show and 3 files for reproduction as wall graphics), as well as an electronic file of exhibition text.

Availability:

Available beginning fall 2022.

Space requirements:

800-1,200 square feet.

Fees:

\$30,000 participation fee for 16 weeks.

Crating, insurance, and courier costs to be determined.

Shipping costs to be determined according to venue.

Curator:

Wendy Nālani E. Ikemoto, Senior Curator of American Art

Contact:

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Above and cover image:
John C. Calhoun monument, Charleston, SC, 2020
Richard Ellis/Alamy Live News

All photos by Glenn Castellano/New-York Historical Society unless otherwise noted.