

STATEMENT FROM DR. MALINDA MAYNOR-LOWERY

Monuments are art, and they reflect values—they are not historical instruction and they do not reflect a historical understanding (though members of society who would like us to believe in their versions of the past have consciously labeled them as “history,” and the public is divided over whether that is at issue). In fact, what is at issue with these monuments are values, and who gets to decide what represents a community’s values. In our Center’s collaboration, we’ve worked to define public art, and we’ve worked to determine what values public art should express. Collectively, we arrived at an important premise for our work: a few cannot legitimately determine, on behalf of the many, what to commemorate, and doing so will ultimately result in public works of art that neglect the complexity of the individuals commemorated and emphasize the values of some to exclude others.

For example, Confederate monuments, Mount Rushmore, Columbus statues, conquistador statues, and pioneer monuments in the West all reflect a celebration of conquest, and if Indigenous or Black people are not overtly depicted, they imply that these populations had little if nothing to say about these historical figures or the events they participated in. Of course some monuments, like Early Days in San Francisco, the Lewis and Clark monument in Charlottesville, or the monument in Lincoln Park in Washington DC actually do depict the people being conquered, or enslaved, always in subordinate positions to the individuals featured. These monuments are especially interesting because they work against the historical evidence we have, that these supposedly subordinate peoples actually played a determinative role in the ventures being celebrated. This fact—well established by many historians in many fields—is not visible in the kinds of monuments I’ve listed.

It’s become clear that public art should provide access points to many people, not just a few. It’s also clear that public art can only do so much when it’s in this static, fixed form, like a statue. Statues or monuments of these kind ask the public to do something they can’t realistically do—pretend that these people are unquestionably good, or that their actions had unquestionably good outcomes. This is inaccurate and much of the American public knows it, and has always known it.

The (mostly) men who are commemorated were not merely “men of their time.” They were (mostly) men who advocated human trafficking, who practiced kidnapping, condoned or participated in rape, and believed in a racial hierarchy which others abhorred, even at the time.

They also took great risks to create profit for Europeans and their descendants in the Americas. There were always people who objected to these values, and we haven't built monuments to many of those men and women.

Regardless, statues do not help us understand the complexity of the past, nor do they help us ask questions about the past and what we should do now.

As a historian, I wouldn't pretend to know what's best for a community. I am proud of the process we engaged in at our Center, and the outcomes promise to be just as stimulating as the monuments that Americans are taking down. But it was a community driven process, undertaken by people who did not come to the table with polarized viewpoints, but with openness, curiosity, and a desire to listen humbly.

If we replace these monuments, I'd like to see them replaced using a process where that community who is most impacted has the opportunity to determine its own values and what they want public art to be.