

A Discourse on History, Monuments and the Black Artist

By Patricia Andrews-Keenan

Nigerian novelist **Chinua Achebe** is credited with the quote, “Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” And so, it has been across time and history from the Greeks and Romans celebrating physical perfection to the celebration of warriors and conquerors, heroes and history makers. Every continent, every country, every city, county, parish, town, and rural burg celebrates its heroes. Yet, what we know for sure is that heroes are fallible and not always altruistically driven. Monuments to enslavers, colonizers, warmongers and profiteers exist worldwide, while Black heroes, except for a select few, have been purposefully ignored.

Is there still a need for monumentality? And how do we deal with the past while immortalizing the present? Swiss historian and architecture critic Siegfried Giedion wrote, “Every period has the impulse to create symbols in the form of monuments, ... ‘things that remind,’ things to be transmitted to later generations. This demand for monumentality cannot, in the long run, be suppressed.

So, what are we to do when faced with the past, while contemplating the future? This was the thread woven through this October’s **Black Fine Art Month™** 2021, an initiative of **Pigment International™**. The history is real, whether we pull it down or vandalize it. The trauma is imprinted on our DNA whether the monuments exist physically or not. We posit that while destruction provides some temporary succor, what we truly want is for the lion to tell his story. We want the validation that comes from both telling our story and putting it on display for the world.

Remediation efforts are underway globally. The statue of “confederate president” Robert E. Lee was taken down in Richmond, Virginia, this September after 130 years on the city’s Monument Avenue. It took a ruling from the Virginia Supreme Court to bring it down, and yet that was only one of the demands from the city’s residents. They continue to advocate for major structural reforms to the state’s criminal justice system.

Kehinde Wiley’s “Rumors of War” was installed at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) in December of 2019 after first being unveiled in Times Square in September of that year. The inspiration for “Rumors of War” was a statue of Confederate Army Gen. “J.E.B.” Stuart, created in 1907. As with the original sculpture, the rider strikes a heroic pose while sitting upon a muscular horse. However, in Wiley’s sculpture, the figure is a young African American dressed in urban streetwear. Proudly mounted on its large stone pedestal, the bronze sculpture commemorates African American youth lost to the social and political battles being waged throughout our nation, according to the VMFA website. It was the artist’s first monumental public sculpture.

The statue of Edward Colston, a Bristol, England, slave trader was replaced after 125 years by a statue of Black Lives Matter protester **Jen Reid** by artist **Marc**

Quinn. According to the Guardian, Quinn employed 201 cameras, attached to a hi-tech, 3D scanning machine to capture Reid's defiant pose, now rendered in black resin. He first saw Reid posed on the plinth in an Instagram post by @biggiesnug, with the caption: "My wife. My life. She matters."

The internationally renowned Jamaican sculptor **Basil Watson** has been chosen to design a permanent national Windrush monument that will be unveiled in Waterloo, London, next year. The BBC reported that the statue, which is backed by £1m (an estimated \$1.3 million U.S. dollars) of government funding, will showcase Black three figures—a man, woman and child—dressed in their "Sunday best," climbing a mountain of suitcases hand-in-hand. The design pays tribute to the dreams, ambition, courage and resilience of the Windrush pioneers who arrived in Britain after the second World War. The statue will go on display at Waterloo Station on Windrush Day, June 22, 2022.

Chicago artist and sculptor **Gerald Griffin**, Griffin Fine Art Gallery, has created a bust of our country's first Black female Vice President **Kamala Harris**, a full-body maquette of the country's 44th and first Black President **Barack H. Obama**, and a bust of a young abolitionist **Frederick Douglass**. Griffin has advocated for the creation of these pieces as monuments to tell a fuller story of American history. The City of Chicago has convened the Chicago Monuments Project to review the city's collection of monuments and make recommendations. According to committee member **Ernie Wong** of Site Design Group, the city has identified 42 problematic monuments. He joined panelists Griffin and author and activist **Michelle Duster**, great-granddaughter of journalist, anti-lynching activist and suffragette Ida B. Wells, for a Black Fine Art Month Salon Talk titled "Contemplating Chicago's Public Square." The panel was moderated by **Perri Irmer**, CEO of the DuSable Museum of African American History, a Smithsonian affiliate.

A monument to journalist and civil rights activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett was unveiled in Chicago this summer. Officially named "The Light of Truth Ida B. Wells National Monument," the monument, created by international sculptor **Richard Hunt**, was dedicated in the South Side neighborhood where Wells lived out her life. Duster was the lead fundraiser on the committee, which also included Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times reporter and creator of the landmark 1619 Project **Nikole Hannah-Jones**. She stressed that no public funds were used to erect the monument.

These are just a sampling of the efforts happening here and abroad that speak to how we elevate our heroes in shared public spaces.

The **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** asks the question, "Does the civic landscape show an accurate picture of our nation, or propagate a woefully incomplete story?" According to its website the foundation has committed an unprecedented \$250 million to transform the nation's commemorative landscape by "*supporting public projects that more completely and accurately represent the multiplicity and complexity of American stories.*" Launched in 2020, the **Monuments Project** builds on the organization's efforts to express, elevate and preserve the stories of those

who have often been denied historical recognition, and explores how we might foster a more complete telling of who we are as a nation. The foundation also undertook a National Monument Audit to provide details on the country's 50,000 statues, monoliths and markers to gain new insights into the country's commemorative landscape.

For her book, "Honoring The Legacy: A Guide of African American Monuments and Statues," author **Tammy Gibson** traveled to more than 500 sites to highlight the historical landmarks, museums, sculptures, markers and cemeteries that tell the story of African Americans in this country. Her personal journey began with a trip to Africa in 2010 but attending a conference at the University of Virginia-Charlottesville after the protests there by white supremacists cemented her resolve. However, of the 500-plus pieces she encountered, only 120 were created by African American artists.

Correcting the inequities that exist in the public landscape is a slow and arduous process. In the words of historian and culturalist **David Driskell**, our goal is to "see beyond the contours of time and history. We must be up to the challenge; we must commit to the work. Anything less and we risk never attaining that" more perfect Union!