Forged to be an Answer and Standing as a Question - the Pioneer Monument of San Francisco

We are driving across the Bay Bridge into the heart of San Francisco to Fulton Street between Hyde and Larkin Streets to witness the Pioneer Monuments steps from the Civic Center.

Dedicated on November 29, 1894, this monument was created by Frank Happersberger out of bronze and financed by the estate of James Lick. Once five, now four statues form together to create this monument. The center portion of the statue is a column bolstering a statue of a California grizzly bear alongside the Roman goddess Minerva, goddess of wisdom and war. Minerva looks southward with a melancholy yet determined gaze. The model for Minerva was the Statue of Liberty, given as a gift to the States in 1886. The column base is adorned with metal medallions representing the most important figures in the history of California, the benefactor of the statue is included in this glory.

The statues surrounding the center of the monument depict an individual aspect of the founding of California. Each faces a cardinal direction. two female statues symbolically depicting Commerce and Plenty, one statue depicting gold miners of the California gold rush in 1849, and one statue of a missionary, a native American, and a vaquero. This statue was not left standing.

Located on the south of the main monuments, the female figure of commerce stands with an oar in her hands, symbolizing the booming shipping industry of the time. The economy of California in the 1880’s entirely relied on fishing, whaling, and other maritime trades. Commerce can be seen as a dedication to the economic success of the state as a whole and a promise of continuing prosperity.

Directly across from commerce is Plenty, facing northward. A full cornucopia rests in her left hand. This symbol is a direct homage to the advertisements targeted towards immigrants to

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2 Ibid, 1
3 Ibid, 1
entice them to move westward. Radiating possibility and riches, Plenty embodies the hope for new life in the new state of California.

The third statue, pointing westward, is nicknamed “49” after the year of the Gold Rush. The three miners are modelling after James Marshall, a carpenter credited with first discovering the gold in the area. The gold craze is what established a solid population and economy in California, the promise of the “Golden Gate” established Californian culture.

In this very spot stood the statue known as Early Days till September 2018. The final statue pointing eastward depicts a missionary trying to convert a Native American who kneels at his feet, a vaquero or cowboy from Mexico stands behind the missionary. The Spanish missionary helps the beaten native from the ground and points toward the Christian god’s heaven. The missionary is father Junipero Serra who is credited with bringing Christianity to California in 1769. John Sutter, an American Mexican citizen who introduced capitalism to America, is depicted as the vaquero. The native American depicted is what was known as a Plains Indian, not a tribe native to the Bay Area even remotely.

Before its removal, this statue was protested for decades. In 1991, a plan to move the entire statue was set in place so it would reside in front of the new City Hall. Native American communities argued the statue should not be moved or kept in its place but taken down entirely for its celebration of Native American suffering, subjugation, and inaccuracy. This motion was ignored and denied by the City. In the following 20 years, lawsuits and complaints led the San Francisco Arts Committee to unanimously agree to remove Early Days from the monument. This decision followed the events in Charlottesville in August of 2017. It was removed in the shroud of darkness and moved into private storage until a long-term decision of the fate of the statue can be made. Allison Cummings, senior registrar of the City’s Civic Art Collection has hinted the statue may not stay in the state for long, with the commission “receiving interest.”

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4 Ibid, 1
5 Ibid, 1
7 Ibid, 6
8 Ibid, 6
12 Ibid, 10
13 Ibid, 9
The removal was criticized by those who argue that capitalism and Christianity are just as momentous foundations as the Gold Rush and Commerce. They declare that, though unfortunate and saddening, the Native American subjugation and conversion was a cornerstone of the state that could not be erased. A member of the Historic Preservation Commission paralleled this removal to the destruction of art by the Nazi’s, arguing removal is as bad as public destruction. This individual argued that the decision was “childish” and he would appeal to federal courts about the removal.

Some members of the Native American community and supporting citizens argue that the monument should not stand at all since it was funded and created by those who oppressed and took advantage of the native people. The noticeable absence of Early Days is a visual and literal erasure of the only native depiction in the statue, now the only figures standing are white, rich men and mythological women. Neither versions of the monument are realistic depictions of the population that built California, but one caricatures and belittles and the other erases the suffering from sight. Only the viewer who can look past the solid and vacant stares of the statues can uncover the injustice and the prejudice behind the glory and foundation of the state. Forged to be an answer and standing as a question, the Pioneer Monument evokes a visual and message of an ambiguous past and an incomplete future.

14 Ibid, 10
15 Ibid, 11