The Museum of Fine Arts, located in Boston, Massachusetts, is one of the largest museums in the world. Home to more than 500,000 works of art and over 8,000 paintings, the museum is considered to have one of the most comprehensive collections in the Americas.

When visiting the Museum of Fine Arts, one will immediately notice the Native American monument that is right in front of the entrance. Created by Cyrus E. Dallin in 1909, the *Appeal to the Great Spirit* monument has been standing in front of the MFA since 1912 and has since become an icon for the MFA. Although it was originally planned for the monument to be displayed only temporarily, it has stood at the front permanently ever since.

Sculpted out of bronze and green patina, this monument presents a Native American man on a motionless stallion with his arms raised to the sky in order to call on the Creator, or Great Spirit. The Native, however, has certain features that do not reflect just one Native American tribe or community. For example, the regalia that he wears is not from one Indigenous community, but from many, the headdress imitates Lakota featherwork, the necklace resembles Navajo squash blossom jewelry, and finally the loincloth and moccasins seem to have no connection to any recognized Native American community. In the 20th century, and even today, some consider these objects to be a sign of “authenticity”, however these are merely an invention, a white fantasy of Native culture.

While many public monuments celebrate specific military heroes or events, the Native American man in *Appeal to the Great Spirit* is alone and unarmed. Rather than being included in any Indigneous community, the figure is separated and is wearing a combination of regalia, which fails to represent the actual Indigenous peoples living in the 20th-century. There is no mention of the Massachusetts Native American tribe, who were the original inhabitants on the land on which the monument was built on.

Even though Dallin was a noted advocate for Natives’ rights, his art did not deviate from the stereotypical imagery of Native Americans that we see today. *Appeal to the Great Spirit*, in recent years, has been a source of debate like many monuments we hear about today. When we hear about monuments such as the Robert E. Lee monuments in the South and other confederate statues, the debate over whether or not to remove these monuments from public spaces has been brought to the forefront. *Appeal to the Great Spirit* has not been immune to this debate, rather it has entered into the territory of “cultural appropriation, public monuments, and Indigneous erasure.”

To those who view the monument in a more negative perspective, *Appeal to the Great Spirit* symbolizes the “Vanishing Indian” trope. The “Vanishing Indian” trope is when Natives are depicted as this ill-fated race with no hope but to quietly disappear from the world in order to make way for the superior race. Although this trope has been proven false over and over again, monuments such as *Appeal to the Great Spirit* only reinforce this mindset to non-Indigneous people.

Beginning in October of 2019, the Museum of Fine Arts invited people from all backgrounds, including Native American artists, Dallin scholars, and MFA visitors to answer the question, “What do you see when you look at Cyrus Dallin’s *Appeal to the Great Spirit*? When reading
through the responses, there isn’t a clear answer, rather a complicated one. To some, the monument is an inaccurate, painful, and oppressing symbol, while for others, the monument symbolizes power and freedom.

When observing the monument, one sees how the arms are raised and eyes are pointed towards the sky. Mentioned previously, the Native American man seems to be calling on “God”, or Great Spirit. It looks like the man is hopeless and is in a “surrendering” stance. This stance gives off a begging and praying mood. This only plays into the “Vanishing Indian” trope because one can interpret this position as the man asking the Great Spirit for their power or mercy so that he can survive the ever changing landscape around him.

*Appeal to the Great Spirit* continues to be a controversial monument for the Museum of Fine Arts. Even though Cyrus Dallin was an advocate for Indigenous rights, his art does not support his views, rather it strengthens the “Vanishing Indian” trope. To Indigenous people, this monument serves as a painful reminder of the erasure of their people. To others, it is a beautiful monument that symbolizes power and freedom.

As time goes on and more and more people come and visit the Museum of Fine Arts, there will be more opinions on the *Appeal to the Great Spirit* monument. Controversial monuments such as this one will continue to be a challenging topic that not just museum curators will have to talk about, but also the people of Boston, Massachusetts, and museum visitors. Does the *Appeal to the Great Spirit* symbolize oppression, pain, and cultural appropriation, or does it present power and freedom? Should the monument be removed from the front of the MFA, even though it has been there for more than a century? Should it be destroyed, or should it be placed in the Art of the Americas exhibit, more specifically, in the Native American Art exhibit? Questions will continue to be asked, and they will have to be answered.
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