Ether and Ethereal:

How A Statue Represents the Transcendence of Ether Beyond the Dentist’s Chair.

Earlier this summer, a question was posed to me: is the purpose of a monument to encapsulate and memorialize how something happened, or is it set a standard for what should be? As I looked at statues of formerly celebrated Confederate generals, a controversial Emancipation Proclamation memorial, and numerous other immortalizations, I fell into the trap of believing that the two are mutually exclusive. It wasn’t until I encountered a seemingly insignificant, maybe even silly, monument that I came to understand that this doesn’t necessarily have to be the case.

The Ether Monument, also known fondly as the “Good Samaritan Monument,” is the oldest memorial in one of the oldest public gardens in America and, yet, pedestrians seem to pay it very little mind. Larger and grander monuments in the park attract crowds of intrigued people. In stark contrast, one of the most striking things I found about the Ether monument is how un-striking others seem to perceive it. Very few passersby pause for a moment and interact with it, rarely if ever stopping to admire its details or inscriptions. Honestly, I can’t say I blame them. When I first came upon the Ether monument, I thought to myself that a statue so intricate and

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beautiful must be for something extraordinary. It seems a little bit ridiculous to install a 40 foot “thank you” to something used in procedures as simple as a root canal. But, upon deeper inspection, the Ether Monument actually holds not just immense significance from the time of its creation, but also surprising relevance in today's society. In many ways, the Ether monument represents a gift that keeps on giving: Ether was the root from which many world changing medical advancements grew. And yet, people seem to flock to depictions of the serious, the heroic, and the magnanimous based on visual rhetoric, preferring statues that boast one great historical figure to a statue that immortalizes a privilege most people don’t consider themselves lucky to have.

While the visual rhetoric of the Ether monument is a bit more subtle in comparison to other stoneworks in the Commons, it hides a mountain of meaning beneath its surface. Sculpted by John Quincy Adams Ward in 1868, it was raised to commemorate the first public use of ether by two doctors, William Thomas Green Morton and John Collins, but you could never tell this from looking at the monument— one of the characteristics I find most interesting. The Ether Monument does not celebrate a singular heroic doctor or generous beneficiary. Instead, lifted up above a granite platform of beautifully crafted gothic arches and Greco-Roman pillars, two figures are captured acting out a biblical scene: the Good Samaritan helping a dying stranger. After my initial scan, I found my eyes drawn to the base of the memorial, a small fountain enhanced with lion's heads molding. I personally find it interesting how a monument which, at its core, is about extending life would choose to incorporate a fountain in its architectural design, almost as if the “Good Samaritan” memorial were riffing off of the Fountain of Life fable. The sides of the monument display different scenes or inscriptions, continually intriguing pedestrians.

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2 Ibid., p 1.
3 Ibid., p 1.
as they circle it. The first side shows a surgical patient presumably under the influence of ether, the second shows an angel descending to put a suffering human out of their painful misery, the third shows a wounded soldier in the hands of a careful surgeon, and the fourth exhibits the monument's main inscription: “In gratitude for the relief of human suffering by the inhaling of ether, a citizen of Boston has erected this monument.” A rather simple dedication for a rather paramount development.

If you take a close look at the Good Samaritan, you’ll notice that he is not dressed in traditional Western garb, but rather in “Medieval Moorish-Spanish” style. This stylistic choice was meant as a nod to the Medieval Muslim medical community, which brought about landmark developments in healthcare and physiology, such as the ideas of organized hospitals and physicians training. This gesture of giving credit where credit is due, however small, and of including a different culture to share some of the glory, is an action well ahead of its time. Even now, American groups and organizations have difficulty acknowledging the contributions of different cultures to great advancements in technology, medicine, literature, and scholarship. The combination of Gothic, Greco-Roman, and Moorish-Spanish design represents a physical kind of diversity that we don’t usually see in monuments, even in a city as progressive as Boston.

The “Good Samaritan” monument extends beyond the development of a simple anesthetic to the greater Boston medical community, a group whose impact upon the world is far from small. Unbearable pain prohibited scientific and medical advancements for centuries, leaving the possibilities of technology in relation to the human body under complete lockdown. When ether was developed, physiological floodgates burst open, giving way to a medical renaissance that changed the world. The first successful organ transplant with a live donor, first

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polio virus culture, first successful limb reattachment, first isolation of a cancer gene, and first fertilization of an ovum all happened in what Harvard Magazine calls the “Mecca of medicine, home to some of the most prestigious hospitals and medical schools, physicians and medical scientists in the world.” Less than 90 square miles has come to host a buzzing biotech hub, with over 430 biotech firms operating within Boston city limits. A little over a year ago, one such biotech firm would rise to fame by pulling the human race out of a dark tunnel and towards the light: Pfizer developed their Covid-19 vaccine on May 10th of this year, a gargantuan feat that entirely proves the saying “necessity is the mother of invention.” The development of ether launched a medical dynasty that is still going strong.

Beyond the pride that Bostonians may feel in their physiological prestige, I believe there is commitment here to something greater than achievement for glory’s sake. To me, the Ether monument is a testament to the fact that Boston hosts these feats for more than vain progress, economic gain, or personal glory. It is a testament to community, a commitment to life, and overall a commitment to togetherness. At the end of the day, that’s what the Boston medical community is working towards, and what the Ether monument immortalizes. Especially after a year of being separated from loved ones, friends, and family, the world thirsts for the opportunity to be together. If the point of medicine isn’t to extend time with the ones you love, what is?

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0:20: Tom Collins, Photographer. Photograph from CQ-Roll Call, Inc / Getty Images. 1600 × 1067

0:26: Joseph Prezioso, Photographer. Photograph of Columbus statue. Photograph from AFP/Getty Images.


0:42: John P. Soule, Photographer. “Ether Monument, Public Garden, Boston, Mass.”

Photograph. Boston, MA: c. 1850–1920. From the Boston Public Library. 1676 × 800

1:26: Photographer unknown. “Dollhouse miniature handcrafted 1/12th scale Ether crate and bottle medical.” From Teresa Dudley on Etsy.

https://www.etsy.com/listing/224342191/dollhouse-miniature-handcrafted-112th?ga_order=most_relevant&ga_search_type=all&ga_view_type=gallery&ga_search_query=ether+bottle&ref=sr_gallery-1-7&frs=1
223 × 300

1:35: Jaap Arriens, Photographer. Photograph of Ether symbol. Photograph from NurPhoto via Getty Images. 1200 × 797


1:44: Photographer unknown. Photo of Discovering Columbus. Displayed on Gawker.com. 800 × 450


4:45: Migues Medina, Photographer. Photograph of Boston doctors. Photograph from AFP via Getty Images. 4119 × 2746


https://www.massmoments.org/moment-details/boston-dentist-demonstrates-ether.html


https://www.historyofvaccines.org/content/articles/early-tissue-and-cell-culture-vaccine-development
5:14: Photographer unknown. Photograph of Everett Knowles. Displayed on
The1960sProject.com.

5:24: Photographer unknown. “1962 Harvard Medical School Article ~ The Faces of