

We Need to Move, Not Destroy, Confederate Monuments

The art historian in a critic wants to preserve Confederate images in museums, not trash them. At a crime scene, you don't destroy evidence.



By Holland Cotter

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It's a summer of sequels. The culture wars are back. So is the civil rights movement. So is the Civil War. They were all in evidence in Charlottesville, Va., on Aug. 12, when a protest over the planned removal from a city park of a statue of the Southern Civil War general Robert E. Lee exploded in violence. Two sets of protesters met and clashed: a battalion of white nationalists, neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klanners and a crowd of counterprotesters, some with Black Lives Matter placards.

Then there was a second explosion, this one on the internet, when President Donald J. Trump responded to the fracas, after a significant pause, with an equivocating message. He blamed both sides for the violence ("What about the alt-left that came charging?"). He pronounced Robert E. Lee the equal of George Washington. He praised the "beauty" of the Lee statue and lamented the loss of other Confederate monuments

Other monuments were indeed under threat. The Charlottesville incident, and the president's remarks, had created a consciousness-raising call to eliminate — or defend — statues associated with the Confederacy. A frenzied ideological war over visual images was underway. To the white nationalist protesters, Lee is a hero, his statue an emblem of a white dominance that is, in a steadily browning America, in decline. To the racially mixed counterprotesters, the same image is a reminder of a time when the South attempted to split the country in two to preserve black slavery.

And the terms of the contest weren't polite, could not be resolved by a critic's thumbs-up or thumbs-down. The images that lost the fight could disappear, maybe forever. On the day after the rally, footage circulated of protesters in Durham, N.C., pulling a bronze figure of a Confederate soldier from its pedestal. On Wednesday, in Baltimore, four monumental sculptures with Confederate association were hoisted, by night, onto city trucks and driven away.

Similar removals have been called for across the country — in Annapolis, Md.; Jacksonville, Fla.; Memphis; Washington; and New York City, where Mayor Bill de Blasio ordered a tracking down of all

“symbols of hate” on city property. (One was quickly identified: a wall of subway tiling in Times Square that, investigators determined, resembled the patterns on the Confederate flag.)

The destruction of images for social, political or religious reasons is an old story. In dynastic Egypt, pharaohs defaced or repurposed images of predecessors. In northern Europe, Roman Catholic churches were stripped of art during the Protestant Reformation. Nazis purged Germany of “degenerate” modernist painting. Mao Zedong, in his “Four Olds” campaign, tore classical landscapes to shreds.

More recently, videos of the Taliban’s destruction of the colossal Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan became an internet sensation in 2001. So did others, which documented the toppling of a giant statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad two years later. Earlier this year, during the Whitney Biennial, a British artist, Hannah Black, called for the destruction of a painting by a white artist, Dana Schutz, of the martyred Emmett Till.

Basically, I take the move to isolate and banish Confederate nationalist images as a healthy one. The citizen in me — daily witness, like every other American, to viral racism, the national disease — embraces the possibility of unloading traces of its history. The art critic in me welcomes the unloading, too, though for different reasons. Unlike President Trump, I see no beauty in the Robert E. Lee monument, with its bland neo-Classical suavity. And I see in Lee a traitor who waged war against the United States in defense of the indefensible, slavery.

I also see a work that isn’t what it would seem to be, a Civil War-era relic. Like many Confederate military monuments, this one dates from long after the war, from 1924, and was made in New York, primarily by Henry Merwin Shrady, best known for his monument to Ulysses S. Grant outside the United States Capitol in Washington, and finished after Shrady’s death by the Italian sculptor Leo Lentelli.



Protesters in Durham, N.C., pulled down a statue of a Confederate soldier last week. Credit Kate Medley/Reuters

The decades between the 1890s and 1920s saw a surge in such commissions. In those post-Reconstruction years, political power was returning to white Southern hands and the so-called Lost Cause movement was brewing. This was a backward-looking collective fantasy of an idealized antebellum world in which slavery was so benign it couldn’t possibly be counted a major factor in the Civil War.

In short, the Charlottesville Lee monument is far less about mourning a hero and a gone-but-not-forgotten culture than about using elegiac sentiment to sugarcoat a secretly seditious present. Unsurprisingly, the years that produced the work saw a dramatic rise in white supremacist activism and racist violence.

It’s important to understand the conceptual clockwork of such an image: how, through style and guile, it delivers messages that can be read in different ways by different audiences. And those messages are broadcasting clearly, and dangerously, in the present. The violent defense of the Lee

monument in Charlottesville verifies that and makes the historian in me want to preserve these images, not trash them.

As I say, my reasons are pragmatic. When you find yourself at a crime scene, you don’t destroy evidence. You preserve it for the prosecution. In the case of images like this, the prosecutor is history,



A statue of Saddam Hussein was toppled in Baghdad in 2003.
Credit Gilles Bassignac/Gamma-Rapho, via Getty Images

and the trial may be a long one, stretching far into the future, with many witnesses called. Rush to judgment and drastic action should be resisted.

So what do we do with these images, as surely monuments to racism as any Confederate flag now? A preservationist might say, add an interpretive label and leave them in their intended context. But I think the point is to change that context, break its spell, rouse these things up from the slumber of false nostalgia, and wake ourselves up. Plus, if you move them, you can put something in their place, introduce new stories.

As to where they go: museums, existing or custom-built, urban and regional. There they might be in placed the equivalent of open storage, in conditions accessible but controlled, where they can be presented as the propaganda they are. For this to happen, though, museums will have to relinquish their pretense of ideological neutrality. They will have to become truth-telling institutions.

Our encyclopedic museums, like the Met, are giant warehouses filled with global objects designed to function exactly the way the Confederate images do: as instruments of ideological persuasion,

with ethical messages we might well find repellent if we could read their visual symbols, that language above language. And we need to learn to be symbol readers with our eyes wide open in our own political moment of rapid-fire tweets and manufactured distraction. Museums can be training grounds for that reading, though to be truly useful schools they must be willing to identify themselves as historical halls of shame as well as halls of fame.

In reaction to the proposed removal of the Charlottesville monument and others, President Trump tweeted: “Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson — who’s next, Washington, Jefferson? So foolish! You can’t change history, but you can learn from it.”

Wrong. You can change history, because you can change your view, which is never certain, even if Lost Cause thinking and contemporary white nationalist politics insist it is. By mining something called the past through images and words, scholars change history, map its cycles, make it yield fresh news. For our part, what we can do is gather evidence, like it or not, and pass it on.