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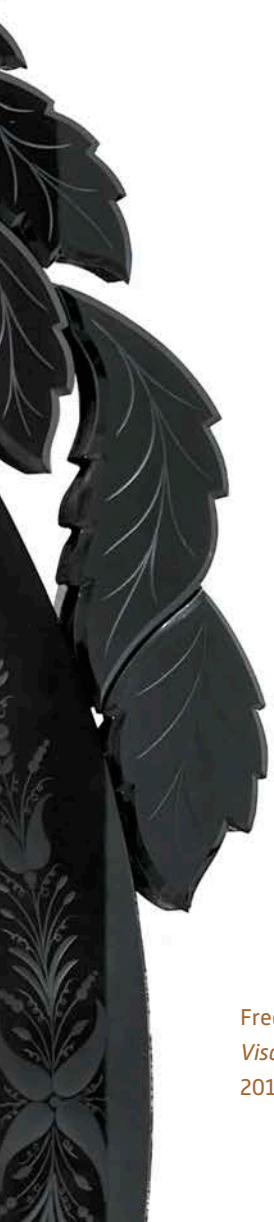
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Introduction

Karen Lemmey, Tobias Wofford, and Grace Yasumura

WE NAVIGATE A WORLD BRIMMING with sculpture, from the relief work on coins in our pockets to the equestrian monuments that tower over our public spaces. In recent years, increasingly acute attention has been given to the racist monuments celebrating the Confederacy, settler colonialism, and enslavers that dominate civic places. The demands to remove public monuments that embody and uphold white supremacy are but one example of the intertwined history of race and American sculpture, which is deeper, more varied, and more complex than the recent debates over these statues might suggest. *The Shape of Power: Stories of Race and American Sculpture* is an invitation to consider the role sculpture plays in the construction and maintenance of race and racism in the United States. The project examines the medium as both a tool of oppression and domination and one of liberation and empowerment. At its core, *The Shape of Power* asks, why is sculpture such a vital medium to communicate ideas of race? How does the medium give physical form to racist ideas, shaping how generations have learned to visualize and think about race? And how do artists use the medium to challenge the enduring social and cultural constructions of race and racialized power while offering new visions of community, identity, and selfhood? Unlike other traditional fields in American art, sculpture remains



Fred Wilson, *I Saw Othello's Visage in His Mind* (detail), 2013; see CAT. 27, p. 88



understudied. The last major survey of American sculpture was published in 1968 (revised in 1984). While this catalogue is not a comprehensive study, it attends to the many shortcomings that came before it while responding to the exciting developments in the field. Through offerings from ten scholars focusing on a selection of some eighty sculptures made between 1793 and 2023 in a wide range of media, *The Shape of Power* is a portal into nuanced and complex ideas about the enduring power of sculpture as a potent tool in the making and unmaking of race in the United States.

The Enduring Power of Sculpture

Across millennia within nearly every civilization, sculpture often marks a milestone in the formation and assertion of political and cultural identity. Consider colossal stone statues, architectural carvings, equestrian bronzes, and gilded figures, all of which convey a sense of power, even when they lie in ruins centuries later. Scaled up to monumental size and anchored to architecture (fig. 1), sculpture can inspire us to gaze skyward or shrink back with fear. Scaled down to low relief on medals and coins (fig. 2), sculpture can fit in a pocket and travel widely to disperse its image and message. Sculpture in any size can be a succinct and enduring signifier of power, and its presence and value often outlast the authority that commissioned it. Ancient Greco-Roman sculpture, for example, had such cultural currency during the European Enlightenment that Napoleon Bonaparte felt compelled to haul away troves of Rome's most famous ancient marbles as part of his armistice agreement with the Vatican in 1796.¹ Around that same time, the early leaders of the United States, who were profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment, readily recognized the power of sculpture and eagerly adopted its visual language as they asserted national sovereignty. Horatio Greenough's monument for the US Capitol of George Washington is one example, which presented the first president as the Roman deity Jupiter (fig. 3).



Fig. 1
Visitors look up at the statue of Abraham Lincoln, ca. 1956, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC

Fig. 2
Adolph A. Weinman, Louisiana Purchase Exposition Commemorative Souvenir Medal in Display Box, 1904 [see CAT. 15, p. 68]

Sculpture has the power to hold our attention because it shares our space. It can be massive—weighty and unwieldy—enveloping us or casting us in its shadow, making us feel its presence even when we are not actively gazing at it. Sculpture influences how we move through space, encouraging us to walk around it or step over it, lean in or back up. Look at a sculpture long enough and you might assume its pose or notice a nearby onlooker doing so. Sculpture influences how we see the world around it, including ourselves and each other.² In a museum gallery, it can be a powerful and surreptitious force that connects strangers simply by alerting them to each other in the room. Sculpture provokes a visceral and emotional response in our bodies, so much so that we feel compelled to touch it.

Sculpture itself has close ties to the body. For centuries, especially before photography, sculptors were commonly called upon to make plaster life casts and death



Fig. 3

African American school children surround Horatio Greenough's 1840 marble statue of George Washington (now in the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection) on the US Capitol grounds, around 1900

Fig. 4

David Hammons, *In the Hood*, 1993, athletic sweatshirt hood with wire, 23 × 10 × 5 in., Courtesy the artist and Tilton Gallery, New York



masks, a process that required intimate contact between artist and sitter. Sculpture made from such close studies of the body has an eerily lifelike quality that can be disarming. It can stand in for a person in favorable ways, such as a funerary sculpture honoring the deceased or a memento preserving a loved one's likeness.³ But sculptural surrogates, whether rooted in body casting or figural representation, can also be harmful and damaging if used as effigies burned in protest, dehumanizing mannequins in dioramas, or what Brinda Kumar describes as "proxy figures" that strip away any agency of an individual or community that would object to such representation.⁴ This uncanny ability to reference a body in absentia has positioned sculpture to be adopted for a range of purposes, including the construction of race.

How Sculpture Helps Construct Ideas of Race and Racism

Given its effective capacity to imitate people, it seems expected to wonder how sculpture has contributed to the ways we have learned to see race and racialize others, whether through figural or symbolic representations that connect to our everyday lives. How quickly do we assign race to the subject of a sculpture, even if abstract? We can conjure a body and racialize it from the most minimal prompt. Take, for example, David Hammons's sculpture *In the Hood* (fig. 4), consisting solely of a cloth hood cut from a black sweatshirt. It may take only an instant for an African American male youth to come to mind, perhaps specifically Trayvon Martin, who was fatally shot in February 2012, days after his seventeenth birthday, by an assailant citing the teen's hoodie as reason to perceive him as a threat. Martin's death mobilized nationwide protests against the fatal consequences of racial profiling. A hood cut from a sweatshirt does not universally signify race, but, in the United States, the hoodie is at present tied inextricably to the fatal shooting of young Black men. This racialization of the hoodie happens because a series of references and associations are brought to bear on the object and layered together. Hammons's title refers colloquially to "hoods," or racially segregated neighborhoods, that exist throughout the United States as well as



Fig. 5

Dustin Klein and Alex Criqui projected an image of Harriet Tubman onto the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee in 2020 as part of a Reclaim the Monument, a protest art project promoting the removal of Richmond's Confederate Monuments

the hooded sweatshirts that became associated with Black youth and hip-hop culture. Even though Hammons made this sculpture in 1993, before Martin was even born, it powerfully conjures the boy's tragic death. The teen's hoodie was already a cultural touchstone when Hammon's sculpture was chosen as the cover image for poet Claudia Rankine's 2014 book *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which explores the presence and effects of racism in American life. The intensity of this connection has grown as the sculpture accrues layers of meaning. Today, we imagine Hammons's empty hood as filled again and again with the bodies of young Black men murdered through police violence. There is nothing inherently racial about a cloth hood, or, for that matter, a chunk of marble or a bronze form. But each of these materials, when presented as figurative sculptures, has been assigned a race. Can reflecting on how we racialize objects help us become more aware of how we racialize people?

"Race and American sculpture" may immediately bring to mind monument removals, for the press has so frequently covered both the volatile toppling and carefully engineered dismantling of

numerous statues of Confederate figures (fig. 5). This movement has spread globally and increased to include the removal of particular clergymen, doctors, statesmen, and others identified as advocates for white supremacy.⁵ Some may also think of the groundswell of new monuments being erected as communities seek to present more inclusive narratives and honor underrecognized individuals and events, such as Hank Willis Thomas's *Raise Up* (fig. 6) and Simone Leigh's *Sentinel (Mami Wata)* (fig. 7), the latter temporarily installed in New Orleans at the base of a pedestal that once held a monument to Confederate General Robert E. Lee.⁶ These removals and additions have



Fig. 6

Hank Willis Thomas, *Raise Up*, 2016, bronze and cement, 90 × 300 in., installed at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, AL

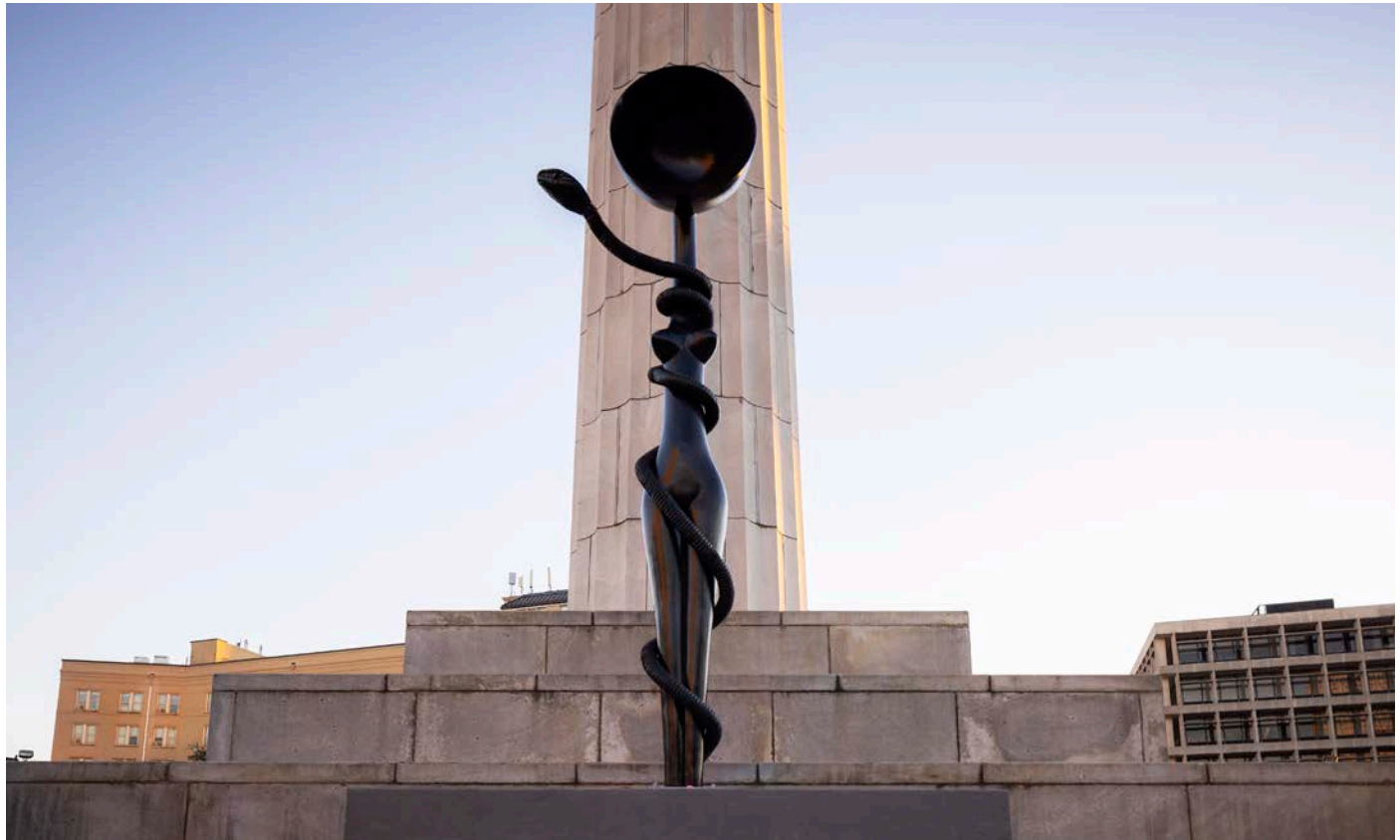


Fig. 7

Simone Leigh, *Sentinel (Mami Wata)*, 2020–21, bronze, 194 × 64 × 28 in., temporarily installed in Egalité Circle, New Orleans, that once held a monument to Confederate General Robert E. Lee [removed in 2017]

heightened public awareness about both race and sculpture, yet curiosity about this subject is often followed by frustration and skepticism of the histories taught, and people yearn for trusted resources to think through current affairs. All the while, both civic and private life have become increasingly polarized, making it difficult to have these conversations.

The recent impassioned debates about what to remove and what to erect in the name of racial justice are just the latest chapter in a much longer history of American sculpture and race, a history that remains underexamined. For many white artists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sculpture was a laboratory for fashioning racialized identities that reflected the rigidly hierarchical ordering of self and other. Consider, for example, the “Indian Head” nickel [see CAT. 11, p. 60], a US coin

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Fig. 8

Ethnological heads called “Turk,” “Modern Egyptian (Hamite),” and “Abyssinian,” Library of Congress Thomas Jefferson Building, Washington, DC

that circulated through millions of hands between 1913 and 1938. Or the racialized ethnic faces decorating the corbels on the facade of the Library of Congress (fig. 8) and many other civic structures around the country. The figures seen in science museums, such as Malvina Hoffman's 1930 series *The Races of Mankind* (see CAT. 50, p. 156), commissioned by the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, were a eugenics-informed attempt to "document" race. The scores of neoclassical white marble figures projected an array of ideals, virtues, and allegories onto an idealized white female body, as seen in Hiram Powers's trio of busts *Faith, Hope* (see CAT. 4, p. 44), and *Charity*, and helped establish racial whiteness as a normative base in figurative sculpture. Or the project of racial othering that took place in the form of a great many "Indian princesses," "noble savages," and other stock types often borrowed from nineteenth-century literature.⁷

Such enduring sculptures were complemented by more ephemeral and mundane sculptural things commonly found in popular culture, from utilitarian and decorative objects to other vernacular sculptures of mummies, lawn jockeys, "cigar store Indians," chinoiserie figurines, and margarita glasses featuring sombrero-clad sleeping men that insinuated racist imagery into quotidian life. What are the repercussions of such objects populating our world, and what are the consequences of normalizing their presence for so many generations?

"Museums Are Not Neutral"

Museums are politically and culturally constructed sites, with deep and complex relationships to knowledge production and power. Artists were among the first critics to interrogate the colonialist foundations of museum practices.⁸ Thanks in large measure to the important work of LaTanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski, founders of the initiative Museums Are Not Neutral, museums are increasingly confronting their histories and working to transform themselves into spaces for greater transparency, honesty, and connection. Informed by the foundational work of Autry, Murawski, and many others, this exhibition has been developed to center the visitor experience and adhere to an ethic of care.⁹ Above all, it positions American sculpture as a portal to and catalyst for conversations about race and racism.

Unlike most Smithsonian American Art Museum exhibitions of the past, this project's main objective is not to celebrate the museum's truly exceptional holdings.¹⁰ The exhibition intends to tell a more inclusive and accurate history of American sculpture, which requires presenting SAAM's collection critically. Such an approach is necessary and long overdue across the field of American sculpture.

The Intertwined Histories of Race and American Sculpture

The Shape of Power asserts that sculpture has played a powerful role in the societal constructions of race in this country over the last two hundred years, giving palpable physical forms to racist ideas, classifications, and hierarchies that have shaped how many generations have visualized and come to think about race. It critically presents a selection of historical works to expose how they have contributed to damaging, racializing forms that embody white supremacist ideologies. Remarkably, this same art form has also been a vital means through which artists have resisted, contested, and refuted racist ideas—some have even used their medium to protest

racial violence and reclaim racial identities.¹¹ These sculptors have been perceptive and expressive cultural critics, creating works that directly reference the historical racist tropes found in earlier examples of the medium, deconstructing them and revealing in the process that racial categories are mutable, subjective constructions that are contingent on class, gender, geography, and other variables and circumstances. Sculptures created today cannot mitigate the damaging effects of the past, nor can they temper, mediate, or reconcile racist historical images. But they can help us find new ways of looking back and offer new conceptual approaches to the present and future. As Jami Powell reflects in this volume, artists today help us imagine what could be next by recognizing and critiquing structures that do not work and offering alternatives in ways that curators and scholars cannot.¹² For the project to convey sculpture's role in giving shape to racist ideas as well as its ability to resist and reenvision, it was essential to include a range of works from the nineteenth century to the present to show the scope and breadth of sculpture's power. This catalogue is not a comprehensive study of the many ways race and American sculpture intersect, nor is it a complete record of works that are relevant to this theme. Rather, it offers a careful selection of some eighty sculptures made in a wide range of media—from bronze and marble to hair, gourds, and glass—between 1840 and the present by nearly five dozen artists whose works reinforce or challenge prevailing ideas about race in the United States.

What Is Race?

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The Shape of Power defines race as an ideological construction, a product of social, political, economic, and cultural relationships and institutions. Race is not a biologically inherited, prepolitical category, but a structure of power deployed to govern people.¹³ Although race is something illusory, it is, of course, a “death-dealing illusion,” as Barbara J. Fields and Karen E. Fields powerfully remind us in their work *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*.¹⁴ Indeed, race creates an architecture of social relations in the United States that produces, for example, anti-Black violence, Indigenous genocide, redlined neighborhoods, and whiteness as property rights—that is, the way the US legal system has created and protected the property interests of those considered white.¹⁵ The assertion that race is a social construct is not new. Many scholars, including W. E. B. Du Bois at the beginning of the twentieth century, have made this compelling argument in different ways across disciplines.¹⁶ By the end of the twentieth century, the Human Genome Project had scientifically proven that race is not tied to genetics and that “on average about 99.9 percent of the genomes of all living humans are the same.”¹⁷ And yet many people continue to see race as biological and physical rather than, as it is defined by natural and social scientists Joseph Graves Jr. and Alan Goodman, “a worldview and social classification that divides humans into groups based on their appearance and assumed ancestry, and that has been used to establish social hierarchies.”¹⁸ One of the goals of *The Shape of Power* is to use sculpture to make evident that, as Fields and Fields stated, “what Americans designate by the shorthand ‘race’ does not depend on physical difference . . . and owes nothing at all to nature.”¹⁹ A broader audience might find these facts more apparent and convincing by seeing them through sculpture, rather than by reading scholarly papers and scientific reports.

Fig. 9

Rina Banerjee, *In Mute Witness...*, 2015/23
(detail; see CAT. 71, p. 224)

Fig. 10

Hiram Powers, *America*, 1848–50 (detail; see CAT. 3, p. 42)

Shortcomings of American Sculpture Histories

The Shape of Power asks us to consider who and what has been left out of the established history of American sculpture and encourages a closer, critical look at sculpture's impact on the world around us. Understanding how historical sculptures racialized their subjects reveals why specific racial categories were constructed and makes evident the relationship between race and power. After all, racism preceded and produced race as a means for colonization and enslavement.²⁰ *The Shape of Power* also questions the exclusionary definition of sculpture as something typically made of bronze or marble, materials that are expensive and difficult to source. Moreover, these materials require significant training and apprenticeship, creating further barriers for women and non-white artists in particular. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the boundaries of what a sculpture could be were rigorously policed by art critics, historians, and academies, marginalizing objects and their makers along lines that mirrored racial, gendered, economic, and ability-based hierarchies. Notably, many of the contemporary sculptors represented here work with materials and techniques—such as fiber, porcelain, assemblage, and beadwork (fig. 9)—that contrast starkly with the stone and bronze statuary of historical sculpture, further challenging the traditional canon (fig. 10). The project's aim is to illuminate the serious consequences of art history's tendency to limit the definition of sculpture, whether by the boundaries of material or by who has been recognized as a sculptor in the past.





Fig. 11

James Hampton, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly*, ca. 1950–64, mixed media, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of anonymous donors, 1970.353.1–.116

In many ways, the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection has reinforced the framing of American sculpture as mainly bronze and stone.²¹ However, it has also taken a comparatively expansive view of American art in its collecting practice. It established collections of folk and self-taught art, Latinx art, and craft well before many other museums.²² As a result, it holds numerous distinctive sculptures. *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly* (1950–64, acquired 1970), a massive work assembled from found objects and aluminum foils by self-taught artist James Hampton, is a touchstone for many visitors (fig. 11). Chicano sculptor Luis Jiménez's *Vaquero* (modeled 1980, acquired 1990; see CAT. 21, p. 80), a monumental fiberglass sculpture of a Mexican cowboy, has graced the museum's north entrance for decades. Edmonia Lewis's singular *The Death of Cleopatra* (1876, acquired 1994) is treasured as Lewis's most significant work (fig. 12).²³ SAAM's sculpture collection is rich with examples by many artists who were skipped over by the early surveys. While *The Shape of Power* intends to thread together works by both underrecognized and well-known artists, major gaps remain in both the diversity of historical sculptors and the subjects represented.

As Director Stephanie Stebich outlines in her foreword, SAAM is noted for its primacy in the field of American sculpture. This comes with a responsibility to redress how the field and the museum have habitually normalized, sustained, and even celebrated racist depictions by presenting them in a matter-of-fact manner focused on beauty, style, craftsmanship, and presumed art historical relevance while neglecting to address the racist messages these works may convey, and the particular effect they have being on long-term display in a public museum in the nation's capital.

Over time, there have been far fewer university classes, exhibitions, and publications focused on this complicated genre, which is often neglected and misunderstood in academia and museums and remains largely understudied, despite the rising interest in public art and monuments.²⁴ The problem is long in the making. In the



Fig. 12

Edmonia Lewis, *The Death of Cleopatra*, carved 1876, marble, 63 × 31 ¼ × 46 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Historical Society of Forest Park, Illinois, 1994.¹⁷

preface to *Sculpture in America* (1968), Wayne Craven wrote, “Not since Lorado Taft’s *History of American Sculpture* first appeared in 1903 has there been a survey study of American sculpture. . . . One wonders how such a major artistic field could have been so long ignored.”²⁵ Craven’s book from more than fifty years ago remains one of the few attempts to survey this field. Before *Sculpture in America* and a handful of other books, including *American Neo-Classical Sculpture: The Marble Resurrection* (1973) by William H. Gerdts, the overall record for historical American sculptures was paltry. Basic information was hard to find, and several major sculptures had been missing for decades.²⁶ Craven’s and Gerdts’s respective undertakings involved delving into archives; writing letters to institutions, collectors, and artists’ families; and traveling around the country to construct an index of American sculpture in a predigital era.²⁷ This research took years and enabled several generations of scholars to advance the nascent field.²⁸ Their work also paved the way for several museums with extensive sculpture collections to publish catalogues of their holdings and make their records available online. It also led to a few exhibitions on American sculpture, including *The Figure in American Sculpture* (1995, Los Angeles County Museum of Art) and *The American West in Bronze, 1850–1925* (2013–14, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), as well as several monographic exhibitions on individual sculptors.²⁹

Craven's and Gerdt's work had major shortcomings, however, which also influenced how museums thought about American sculpture. Both historians overlooked many influential women and artists of color who were celebrated in their day and remain important. While touting Taft's *History* of 1903, Craven failed to mention *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture*, which uniquely focused on the plastic arts and was self-published by African American writer Freeman Henry Morris Murray in 1916. By ignoring Murray, Craven also omitted Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, an important early twentieth-century sculptor whom Murray credits as an indispensable adviser on his research.³⁰ In short, a roster of historical American sculptors composed exclusively by Taft, Craven, and Gerdt's would be grossly incomplete.³¹ Nevertheless, these incomplete histories have too often dominated American sculpture in academic courses and texts and even museums. The Whitney Museum of American Art's 1976 exhibition *200 Years of American Sculpture* closely followed Craven's lead, and its exhibition catalogue included a chapter by him. While it departed from Craven's survey by including a chapter titled "Aboriginal Art," it featured many works by Native artists whose names were not recorded, along with a broader list of sculptures by unnamed folk and self-taught artists. Organized to mark the nation's bicentennial, this landmark exhibition included the work of 140 sculptors, but named just two non-white artists: Black self-taught artist James Hampton, whose work was loaned by SAAM, and Japanese American artist Isamu Noguchi.

After Freeman Murray: Attending to Historical Omissions

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Numerous scholars have since written on the sculptors omitted by Craven, including historians of African American art such as Alain LeRoy Locke and James A. Porter in the first half of the twentieth century, and David Driskell, Samella Lewis, Richard Powell, Sharon Patton, and Lisa Farrington in more recent decades.³² They have been joined by projects such as Gordon Chang, Mark Johnson, and Paul Karlstrom's survey *Asian American Art 1850–1970* and SAAM's *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art*, by E. Carmen Ramos, which give deeper context to contributions of Latinx, Asian American, and Black artists to the histories of American art.³³ These surveys use a particular racial identity as a framework and offer insights into creating a more inclusive and expansive canon of American sculpture by considering both the racial identity of artists and the definition of sculpture itself.³⁴ Such scholarship rectifies historical exclusions of non-white sculptors and gives expanded context to the varied three-dimensional media favored by postmodern artists emerging since the pluralism and multiculturalism of the 1970s and 1980s.³⁵

Centering Whiteness and Celebrating Nationalism in the Early Histories

The early art histories established whiteness as the standard by which all else was compared, an ideology that perpetuates the same racial hierarchies embodied by many of the historical sculptures it considers. Craven gave us chapters like "Cowboys and Indians," while Gerdt's offered "The American Indian—Male" and "The American Indian—Female." They did little to examine the ideologies behind historical sculptures, like American exceptionalism and the American West or other popular nationalistic beliefs about the country's founding and development. These scholars expressed a point of view that celebrated the artistic achievements of American

sculptors within academies, at exhibitions, and in other establishments of the dominant white culture.³⁶

Sculpture has long been the underdog in American art, with far fewer sculptors than painters teaching at the early academies or regularly exhibiting their work, hence the attempt of historical publications to elevate sculpture to the celebrated level of painting. The achievements of the few professional sculptors who enjoyed an international reputation were praised as a point of national pride and touted in the ethnocentric rhetoric of nationalism. In his 1903 book, *American Masters of Sculpture*, Charles Caffin praised post-Civil War sculpture by comparing it to early American neo-classical architecture, writing, "The rebirth of the national conscience and soul found in a revived architecture the means of expressing its national state and civic pride, and in sculpture its worship of heroes."³⁷ Taft's 1903 survey similarly called American sculpture "an art which is vital and significant—the true product of the country and the age which have given it birth."³⁸ Artists themselves sometimes expressed a similar jingoism. As Gutzon Borglum, the virulently xenophobic sculptor of Mount Rushmore and initial sculptor of Stone Mountain, proclaimed, "art in America should be American, draw from American sources, memorializing American achievement."³⁹

Sculpture Presented as Truth

These early writings often described American sculptures as truthful. When writing *The Spirit of American Sculpture* for the National Sculpture Society in the 1920s, Adeline Adams identified the medium as "one of the permanent forces for Truth in the Art of our land."⁴⁰ This belief was especially strong in a white artist's depiction of a racialized other. One of the earliest representations of a Black man on a public monument in the United States, the figure in relief on the base of Henry Kirke Brown's 1853 *DeWitt Clinton* was hailed as "so truthfully rendered."⁴¹ Ten years later, during the Civil War, Brown's protégé John Quincy Adams Ward was likewise applauded for his sculpture *The Freedman* [see p. 153]. Although closely modeled on the ancient, classically idealized *Belvedere Torso*, Ward's figure of an African American man with broken shackles was described by the press as taking "no departure from the negro type. It shows the black man as he runs to-day. It is no abstraction. . . . It is a fact, and not a fancy."⁴² Ward's sculpture *The Indian Hunter* for Central Park in New York City (dedicated 1869) was described by Caffin as "a strikingly vivid realisation of actual facts; of the racial characteristics of both the man and his dog. . . . The group has something of a primitive, almost barbarous feeling [that] seems strangely appropriate to the subject."⁴³ Such critics found "truth" in these renderings of minoritized people because the sculptures closely matched the white mainstream's preconceived notions of how Black and Indigenous subjects appeared.

The perceived truthfulness of American sculpture intensified at the end of the nineteenth century as some sculptors styled themselves as ethnographers, just as the field of anthropology was becoming more established. Hermon Atkins MacNeil, for example, built a reputation for sculpting lifelike scenes based on events he casually observed in the Southwest, such as *The Moqui Prayer for Rain* (modeled 1895–96, cast ca. 1897), which he modeled after attending a Moqui (Hopi) ceremony in 1895. This kind of sculpture-as-reportage gained popular and critical success among viewers who saw these bronzes as factual records without questioning MacNeil's comprehension of what

he observed in Native communities or how he gained access to sacred ceremonies. One reviewer complimented MacNeil for sculpting “genuine savages— not cigar store Indians nor ‘Wild West Show’ specimens,” seemingly unaware that the artist also sourced models from these performances.⁴⁴

The false idea that a sculpture could objectively document a person or subject endured. Patricia Janis Broder, in her 1973 book *Bronzes of the American West*, crowned sculptors with authority: “The Western sculptor has always been a historian, a storyteller conscious of his role in preserving his national heritage. He had an awareness of that which is essentially American and felt that he was witness to a side of American life that would soon belong only to memory or to history.”⁴⁵ In fact, these sculptures are a record of how white settler artists, their audiences, and their patrons constructed race. They portray settler colonialism—and the ideology of manifest destiny—as an inevitable, natural occurrence rather than a carefully engineered plan that evolved over decades and was supported by numerous legislative efforts.⁴⁶ Additionally, many of these historical works won prizes in their day for virtuosity, technical prowess, and ambitious size. Their status as milestones in the field has shielded them from a more comprehensive and critical review of what they represented and the consequences of their existence.

New Critical Approaches

This current decade of the twenty-first century may well mark a turning point in the study of American sculpture. Several institutions in the last few years have organized exhibitions relevant to the relationships between race and sculpture, including *Monuments: Commemoration and Controversy* (2022, New-York Historical Society), *Fictions of Emancipation: Carpeaux Recast* (2022–23, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), *Emancipation: The Unfinished Project of Liberation* (2023, Amon Carter Museum of American Art), *Monuments and Myths: The America of Sculptors Augustus Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French* (2023–24, American Federation of Arts), *re:mancipation* (2023, Chazen Museum of Art), *The Colour of Anxiety: Race, Sexuality and Disorder in Victorian Sculpture* (2022–23, Henry Moore Institute), and the virtual exhibition *Casting Identities: Race, American Sculpture and Daniel Chester French* (2023, Chesterwood), each of which promise new critical approaches.⁴⁷ *The Shape of Power* and these other exhibitions are building on and indebted to a growing body of critical scholarly attention to American sculpture in recent years.⁴⁸

There has yet to be, however, a comprehensive critical study of the history of American sculpture in its broadest definition that applies an interdisciplinary approach from the fields that have transformed art history and the humanities in the last few decades. *The Shape of Power* follows the lead of the founders of the Association for Critical Race Art History, Camara Dia Holloway and Jacqueline Francis, who recognized that art history, as it has come to be practiced, cannot account for the fullest history of race and racism’s role in the production of art in the United States.⁴⁹ Indeed, the work of this exhibition would not have been possible without the foundationally important contributions of scholars outside the field of art history.⁵⁰

The Shape of Power should not be mistaken as a definitive study on American sculpture. Instead, it is perhaps best thought of as a preface to an ambitious but necessary ongoing project. The field of American sculpture would do well to apply what

Toni Morrison proposed in her study of American literature in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992):

*I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest... to outline an attractive, fruitful, and provocative critical project, unencumbered by dreams of subversion or rallying gestures at fortress walls.*⁵¹

“A Map of This Critical Project”

Following Morrison’s call for a critical project, this volume builds a more expansive history of American sculpture. Part one, *Interrogating Sculpture Histories*, provides entry points into ways of seeing sculpture beyond the long-established narratives created by those in power in the United States. Essays by Karen Lemmey and Tobias Wofford demonstrate the complex relationships among the production of sculpture, race, and art history. Spanning the mid-nineteenth century to the present, they reveal how American sculpture became a vessel for racist ideologies and, by extension, racialized identities that were created, debated, and subverted. By reinterpreting historical sculptures and showing how they visualize racist hierarchies—through neoclassical style, romantic tropes, medium, grand displays, and institutional efforts—Lemmey shows how these works supported the ambitions of the American settler nation-state. She mirrors this past with examples of how artists today are critiquing history and these racist tropes to expose the fragility of racial constructions and push the boundaries of the medium. Wofford takes up this interrogation of art histories, focusing on art of the 1960s to today, showing how artists have been challenging the idea of race through sculpture for quite some time. His essay is grounded in sculpture’s capacity as a site of liberation and empowerment and uses methods of interpretation and recognition to present a closer look at representation. He argues how artists have used sculpture to subvert racist stereotypes and expose structures of power, reclaim racial identities rooted in self-definition and the power of community, and find ways to represent identity beyond the established language of race and the figural. These artists challenge exclusionary art histories and lack of diversity in the art world and prompt audiences to consider the entanglement of race and representation through sculpture. Read in tandem, Lemmey and Wofford’s contributions illustrate that American sculpture, like the category of race, is always in the process of transformation.

With this historical grounding, part two, *Reclaiming the Power of Sculpture*, presents six essays that stretch across the centuries and through the places that define the contours of American empire. The work of these authors exposes the messy, uneven, and contingent histories of racialization in the United States. Collectively, they disavow the fictions of race that have for so long masqueraded, as political theorist and Black studies scholar Cedric Robinson argues, as “memory and the immutable.”⁵² Capacious in methodology and subject matter, the essays make legible the relationship between the two linked structures of power and domination—racism and colonialism.

This section opens with James Smalls’s essay, which analyzes how race and ethnography (a field of study dependent upon European and American imperialism) intersect and underpin classicism and primitivism in modern American art. While white

supremacist, anti-Black, and colonial violence undergirds the histories within each essay, they are particularly evident in contributions by Renée Ater, Tess Korobkin, and Elizabeth Hutchinson. Ater illuminates the different artistic strategies each artist employs to memorialize and protest anti-Black violence in sculpture. Korobkin focuses on the unrealized memorial to the atomic bombing of two Japanese cities to think through how the structures of American white supremacy radiate outward and inward, deeply affecting the lives of racialized communities in the United States and globally. Centering on the works of Native women artists, Hutchinson shows how sculptures become sites to not only resist the ongoing and acutely gendered violence of US settler colonialism but to assert Indigenous survivance. Claudia Zapata and Grace Yasumura focus on the work of artists who examine how diasporic communities become racialized as they cross or are crossed by a border into what is now the United States. Zapata contextualizes the racist trope of the “sleeping Mexican” figure to show how Chicana artists have refuted and dismantled it through sculpture. Yasumura’s essay turns to the work of Asian American and diasporic artists to demonstrate how they have disavowed the regimes of racialized representation that emerge out of the United States’ entanglements with Asia.

The final offering is a look at the present and future of the field in the form of a conversation between Jacqueline Francis, Jami Powell, and Grace Yasumura, who discuss similarities and differences across Black and Indigenous studies. Using sculptures in *The Shape of Power* as starting points, they work through histories of enslavement and land dispossession and how artists are deconstructing race, while considering possibilities of the future beyond the structures of the American nation-state. Taken collectively these essays and dialogue chart the entwined and entangled histories of racism in the American empire, examining the practice of artists who productively destabilize the racist ordering of people, knowledge, and art and whose work gestures toward the possibility of an emancipatory future.

Notes

This catalogue capitalizes “Black” and lowercases “white” when used as racial identities. The decision reflects that while both are social constructions, Black is commonly used to refer to a shared history and culture while white is commonly capitalized in white supremacist usage. The language in this volume intends to uplift the former and denounce the latter. Whether or not to capitalize either term is a current debate.

- 1 Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture, 1500–1900* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 5; and subsequent references.
- 2 For this reason, Hiram Powers’s *The Greek Slave* [modeled 1843, carved ca. 1873; see CAT. 5, p. 45], the first sculpture of a nude woman to tour the United States in the nineteenth century, was often shown with separate viewing hours for men and women.
- 3 The uncanny lifelikeness of sculpture has been addressed in several exhibitions not exclusively focusing on American sculpture, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 2018 *Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body*.
- 4 See Brinda Kumar, “Proxy Figures,” in Luke Syson et al., *Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 162–85. For an example of a proxy figure, see Paul Wayland Bartlett’s *Indian Ghost Dancer*, discussed in Karen Lemmey’s essay, 69–71.
- 5 A few such monuments include James Earle Fraser’s *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt* (1939), which stood outside the American Museum of Natural History in New York City until January 2022; Ferdinand Freiherr von Miller’s *J. Marion Sims* (1892), erected in Bryant Park in 1894 and moved in the mid-1920s to Central Park in 1934, where it stood until 2018; Larkin Goldsmith Mead’s *Columbus’ Last Appeal to Queen Isabella*, which stood in the California State Capitol in Sacramento from 1883 until it was removed in 2020.
We use the definition of white supremacy articulated by Cheryl I. Harris in her seminal text “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1714n10. As Harris notes, citing Frances Lee Ansley, “By ‘white supremacy’ I do not mean to allude to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and

relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.”

- 6 The significant surge in new monuments includes permanent works like Lava Thomas’s monument to honor Dr. Maya Angelou, scheduled to be installed in 2024 outside the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library, and temporary monuments like Jeffrey Gibson’s *Because Once You Enter My House, It Becomes Our House* (2020–21) in Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, Queens, and Shahzia Sikander’s *Havah... to breathe, air, life* (2023) in Madison Square Park, New York.
- 7 For example, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 1855 epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha* depicted Native subjects using tropes of the “Indian princess” and “noble savage”; see Elizabeth Hutchinson’s essay “Strength and Resistance in Native American Women’s Sculpture” for her discussion of how Edmonia Lewis uses the same story but challenges the trope of the “Indian princess,” 176.
- 8 One might think of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco’s 1992–93 traveling performance *Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* or Fred Wilson’s 1994 project *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society. In *Couple in the Cage*, the artists presented themselves as caged Amerindians from the imagined island of Guatinau. Adorned in costumes that included a grass skirt, a leopard print bikini top, and a luchador wrestling mask, the first performance in 1992 was staged on the quincentenary anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas. The performance satirizes the Doctrine of Discovery and the attendant mythology around Columbus and other European colonizers who claimed to have “discovered” the New World, massacring and enslaving countless Indigenous people and forcing some to be displayed as exotic curiosities in European courts. The work continues to be a deeply important critique of the colonial legacy of museums, particularly their ties to ethnographic displays and human zoos, as discussed in Lemmey’s essay, 35. Also see Lisa G. Corrin, “Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums, Museums Look at Themselves,” in *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader*, ed. Doro Globus (London: Ridinghouse, 2011), 45–74.
- 9 See Mike Murawski, *Museums as Agents of Change: A Guide to Becoming a Changemaker* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), copublished with the national nonprofit American Alliance of Museums.

- 10 In fact, some sculptures in SAAM’s collection, although quite relevant to the topic, were deemed too offensive to include in the show. The checklist saw many iterations and evolved to include far fewer historical works than are in the museum’s collection that relate to this exhibition. The curators instead chose to include more examples of contemporary works that engage critically with the entanglement of race and the history of American sculpture. Examples of racist works from SAAM’s collection that were omitted include: Donal Hord, *Mexican Beggar*, ca. 1935–39, marble; Hermon A. MacNeil, *A Primitive Chant to the Great Spirit*, modeled by 1901, bronze; A. Phimister Proctor, *Pursued*, modeled 1914, remodeled 1928, bronze; Edward Kemeys, *Head of Osage Indian*, 1871–85, painted plaster relief; and Paul Manship, *James Hazen Hyde Medal (design for reverse)*, 1948, lead.
- 11 Significantly, the NAACP deliberately included sculpture in its anti-lynching exhibitions in the 1930s as a way of raising visibility and awareness of racial violence. For sculptures in *The Shape of Power* that address racial violence as well as interracial solidarity, see essays by Renée Ater, Tobias Wofford, and Tess Korobkin in this volume. Also see the discussion among Jacqueline Francis, Jami Powell, and Grace Yasumura about artists and works that consider futurity in “Intertwined Histories and Present Realities: A Conversation of Possibilities,” 233.
- 12 Powell discusses this in *ibid.*
- 13 The project’s working definition of race is deeply indebted to thinkers like Robin D. G. Kelley and Kimberlé Crenshaw, along with Cedric J. Robinson, who notes that “racial regimes are constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power.” Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), xii.
- 14 Barbara J. Fields, quoted in Daniel Denver, “Beyond ‘Race Relations’: An Interview with Barbara J. Fields and Karen E. Fields,” *Jacobin*, January 17, 2018, <https://jacobin.com/2018/01/racecraft-racism-barbara-karen-fields>.
- 15 As Harris notes, “Whiteness defined the legal status of a person as slave or free. White identity conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits and was jealously guarded as a valued possession, allowed only to those who met a strict standard of proof. Whiteness—the right to white identity as embraced by the law—is property if by property one means all

of a person’s legal rights.” Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1726. In other words, whiteness is understood as other types of inalienable property value derived from non-governmental sources. Harris cites professional degrees, like medical degrees, to help illustrate the point. As Harris notes, for much of American history, Black people would suffer legal consequences for pretending to be white, and if one accused a white person of being Black, one could be held liable for defamation. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1733.

- 16 See Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).
- 17 Joseph L. Graves Jr. and Alan H. Goodman, *Racism, Not Race: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 45.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 19 Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012), 261.
- 20 Graves and Goodman, *Racism, Not Race*, 5–6.
- 21 For example, the practice in both academia and museums of generally dividing American art temporally, usually before and after 1945, has resulted in problematic silos of expertise and methodologies that have obstructed a more comprehensive look across the overall history of American sculpture.
- 22 The Renwick Gallery, a branch of SAAM that is home to the museum’s collection of contemporary craft and decorative art, was established in 1972.
- 23 The museum acquired this work despite the severe vandalism and erosion it endured during a century outdoors—a condition that would have worked against it being considered for comparable historical collections.
- 24 To this day, many sculptors from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remain without recent monographs or catalogues raisonnés.
- 25 Wayne Craven, *Sculpture in America* (New York: Crowell, 1968), ix.
- 26 Among the most notable works whose location was unknown when Craven first published *Sculpture in America* were *Choosing of the Arrow* (1849; see CAT. 9, p. 55) by Henry Kirke Brown, *The Death of Cleopatra* (1876) by Edmonia Lewis, and the eighteen-foot-tall *Diana of the Tower* (modeled 1892, cast 1899) by Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

- 27 This wide-ranging research conducted by Wayne Craven became the basis for the Inventory of American Sculpture, maintained by SAAM today at <https://americanart.si.edu/research/inventories>.
- 28 Roberta K. Tarbell gives a personal account of the vibrant community of doctoral students studying American sculpture with Craven at the University of Delaware in the early 1970s, including Lewis Sharp, H. Nichols B. Clark, Michael Shapiro, and George Gurney, who served as SAAM's curator of sculpture for several decades. Tarbell, "Fifty Years of the History of American Sculpture," *Panorama* 3, no. 1 (Summer 2017): n.p., <https://journalpanorama.org/article/state-of-the-field-studies-in-american-sculpture/fifty-years-of-the-history-of-american-sculpture/>. Gerdtz joined the faculty of The City University of New York, Brooklyn College, and the Graduate Center, in 1971, where he taught numerous students of American art, including Karen Lemmey, until his retirement in 1999.
- 29 Among the first museums to publish catalogues of their sculpture collections are the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and Yale University Art Gallery. More recently, a few museums have organized exhibitions that generally consider sculpture and that have included select works by American sculptors. Among these are *Bronze* (2012, Royal Academy of Arts, London), *Sculpture Victorious* (2014, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT), and *Like Life: Sculpture, Color, and the Body* (2018, The Metropolitan Museum of Art).
- 30 We are grateful to Melanee Harvey, associate professor and coordinator of art history at Howard University, for bringing to our attention the correspondence between Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller and Freeman Murray housed at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University.
- 31 Craven's survey likewise omitted May Howard Jackson, Augusta Savage, Sargent Johnson, Richmond Barthé, William Artis, Nancy Prophet, and numerous other sculptors who were well documented in their time and whose exhibition records and professional experiences intersected with those of some of the white male artists included in his book.
- 32 Alain LeRoy Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* (Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1940);
- 33 James A. Porter, *Modern Negro Art* (New York: Dryden, 1943); David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976); Samella S. Lewis, *Art: African American* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978); Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997); Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Lisa E. Farrington, *African-American Art: A Visual and Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 34 Gordon H. Chang, Mark D. Johnson, and Paul J. Karlstrom, eds., *Asian American Art: A History, 1850–1970* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); E. Carmen Ramos, *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2014).
- 35 For example, David Driskell's 1976 exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (which opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art the same year as the Whitney's *200 Years of American Sculpture*) included not only artists who worked in marble but also those working in media associated with craft.
- 36 Examples of this are recorded in multiracial projects such as Lucy Lippard's *Mixed Blessings* and the groundbreaking exhibition *The Decade Show*, a collaborative effort between the New Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon, 1990); Louis Young and David Deitcher, eds., *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Art, New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Studio Museum of Harlem, 1990).
- 37 Among the few scholars who took a more critical approach to historical American sculpture in this early period were Vivien Green Fryd, *Art and Empire: The Politics of Ethnicity in the United States Capitol, 1815–1860* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992); and Joy S. Kasson, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).
- 38 Charles H. Caffin, *American Masters of Sculpture: Being Brief Appreciations of Some American Sculptors and of Some Phases of Sculpture in America* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903), viii.
- 39 Lorado Taft, *The History of American Sculpture* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 11.
- 40 Gutzon Borglum, "Art That Is Real and American," *World's Work* 28 (June 1914): 200, cited in Patricia Janis Broder, *Bronzes of the American West* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1973), 67.
- 41 Adeline Adams, *The Spirit of American Sculpture* (New York: National Sculpture Society, 1923), xiv, 18, 167.
- 42 "Brown's Statue of Clinton," *Evening Post*, October 12, 1853.
- 43 "Mr. Ward's Statue of the Fugitive Negro, at the Academy of Design," *New York Times*, May 3, 1863, quoted in Sarah Burns and John Davis, eds., *American Art to 1900: A Documentary History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 531.
- 44 Caffin, *American Masters of Sculpture*, 45.
- 45 Jean Stansbury Holden, "The Sculpture of MacNeil," *World's Work* 14 (October 1907): 9409, quoted in Broder, "Hermon A. MacNeil: Immortal Indians," in *Bronzes of the American West*, 88. A young teen named Black Pipe, who purportedly performed in Chicago on Buffalo Bill's stage, was the model for MacNeil's composition *A Primitive Chant to the Great Spirit* (modeled by 1901). Craven, *Sculpture in America*, 517.
- 46 Broder, *Bronzes of the American West*, 13.
- 47 For a history of how immigration legislation influenced the expansion of settler colonialism in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, see Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); and Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).
- 48 At the time of publication, an exhibition organized by Hamza Walker for LAXART and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, had been announced for 2025 and was described as juxtaposing contemporary art and decommissioned Confederate monuments. "Monuments," LAXART, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://laxart.org/monuments>.
- 49 Some art historians have dedicated articles and monographs to Augusta Savage, Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller, Edmonia Lewis, Richmond Barthé, and other sculptors who were overlooked in the early surveys. While it is impossible to include an exhaustive list of those working in American sculpture, this partial list highlights some of the more recent: Melissa Dabakis, *A Sisterhood of Sculptors: American Artists in Nineteenth-Century Rome* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014); Mia Bagneris, "Miscegenation in Marble: John Bell's *Octoroon*," *Art Bulletin* 102, no. 2 (2020): 64–90; Jeffreen M. Hayes, ed., *Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman* (Jacksonville, FL: Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, 2018); Caitlin Meehye Beach, *Sculpture at the Ends of Slavery*, The Phillips Collection Book Prize Series (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022); Lisa Blee and Jean M. O'Brien, *Monumental Mobility: The Memory Work of Massasoit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); and Wendy Bellion, *Iconoclasm in New York: Revolution to Reenactment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).
- 50 See Camara Dia Holloway, "Critical Race Art History," *Art Journal* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 89–92; and the Association Critical Race Art History, accessed April 10, 2024, <https://acrah.org/>.
- 51 This includes Robin D. G. Kelley, Jodi Byrd, Lisa Lowe, Dorothy Roberts, Nick Estes, Sara Ahmed, Ian Haney López, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz.
- 52 Toni Morrison, "Black Matters," in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3.
- 53 Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, xii.

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A close-up, profile view of a marble bust of a woman, likely a classical figure. The sculpture is light-colored and shows detailed features like the nose, lips, and a large, wavy ear of hair. The background is dark.

INTERR SCULPTU H

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COGNATING RE STORIES



"Fragile Fictions" and "Hard Truths" in American Sculpture

Karen Lemmey



IT LIKELY TOOK A full two or three seconds on March 4, 1861, to capture the image of Abraham Lincoln's first presidential inauguration, among the first such events to be photographed (fig. 1). The glass plate negative required a long exposure time, so the immense crowd is blurred as thousands of people—many wearing fashionable top hats of the day—shuffled in place, jockeying their heads to catch a glimpse of Lincoln, who stood under the wooden canopy at the center of the steps. Above, the roof of the United States Capitol Building is scaffolded, appearing like an open construction site unbecoming of an event of such importance. Indeed, both the edifice and the nation were being built: expansions were needed to accommodate a congressional body that grew as the nation rolled relentlessly westward—amassing land through treaties and war—while legislators fiercely relitigated the issue of slavery in each new territory.

It is easy to read this image through narratives of nation building, official histories, and the precarity of a country on the brink of civil war. In just a few years, Lincoln would become the first American president to be assassinated, an event that transformed him into a martyr and sealed his legacy as the Great Emancipator who ended slavery while saving the Union. Missing from the familiar national narrative of Lincoln as hero, but



Fig. 1

John Wood, *The Inauguration of Mr. Lincoln*, March 4, 1861, salted paper print, 14 × 12 3/4 in., Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC

Fig. 2

William M. Chase, *Columbus and Persico [The Discovery of America]*, ca. 1868–85, albumen print, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, New York Public Library Digital Collections

Fig. 3

Unidentified photographer, *Statue of Rescue*, Capitol Front, ca. 1865, albumen print, The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, New York Public Library Digital Collections

plainly evident in the photograph, are the two enormous white marble monuments flanking the steps of the Capitol. On the south pier is *Discovery of America* (fig. 2) by Luigi Persico (1791–1860), which shows Christopher Columbus striding forward, holding a globe aloft in his right hand as an Indigenous woman cowers at his side. On the north pier is *The Rescue* (fig. 3) by Horatio Greenough, also called *The Triumph of Civilization* or simply *Civilization*, a scene of sensationalized violence in which a white pioneer protects his family by arresting the hand of a Native man wielding a tomahawk. In a letter of 1837, Greenough explained that his sculpture meant “to convey the idea of the triumph of the whites over the savage tribes, at the same time that it illustrates the dangers of peopling the country.”¹ Remarkably, Greenough believed his fictional and degrading portrayal of a Native man would “also serve as a memorial of the Indian race, and an embodying of the Indian character.”² For more than one hundred years these immobile stone sculptures spoke volumes, projecting their message from the steps of this seat of power louder and longer than any orator could have done. These sculptures set the national stage for every presidential inauguration from 1853 until 1958, when the eroded marbles were finally removed to storage, where they eventually broke into pieces [CAT. 1].³

Sculpture is often found at the locus of power, making it a rich source of national myths. African American writer Freeman Henry Morris Murray observed in 1916, “Sculpture more frequently than painting serves higher purposes than that of mere ornament. . . . Often it is designed to commemorate. . . . Its main purpose is to ‘say something.’”⁴ Greenough’s and Persico’s monuments forthrightly and unapologetically say something about the founding myths of “discovery” and “civilization” in what became the dominant identity of the United States, one formed by celebrating an ideology of white supremacy and European settler colonialism. As one article summarized it in

1851, *The Rescue* "typifies the settlement of the American continent, and the respective destinies of the two races who here come into collision."⁵ Greenough portrayed the pioneer father as brave and capable, protecting his family against a "savage" warrior who intends to scalp the white mother and child. The fictive scene warps and occludes the actual violence committed against Native peoples through the genocidal strategy to expand white European settlement across North America.⁶ Persico's figure of Columbus dressed in armor likewise appears rational, commanding, and pious as he offers the globe to the heavens, affirming the connection between conquest and the mission of spreading Christianity. By contrast, the Native woman crouching at his side is mostly naked, her hair disheveled as she twists her body away while looking with childlike astonishment at the "discoverer."



CAT. 1

Luigi Persico, *Discovery of America* (fragments), modeled 1839, carved between 1840–43, marble, 12 × 15 × 39 in., Architect of the Capitol

THESE SCULPTURAL FRAGMENTS of the arm of Christopher Columbus are from *Discovery of America*, a marble monument that stood for more than a century on the East Front of the US Capitol Building. The monument visualized and promoted manifest destiny, the belief that divine right empowered the European colonization of the Americas and the subsequent founding of the United States, by showing the conquistador triumphantly lifting a globe heavenward as a woman meant to symbolize Native America crouches at his side. The group was commissioned by Congress in 1837 and served as the backdrop in presidential inaugurations until it deteriorated and was removed in 1958.

Persico and Greenough proudly displayed white supremacy as a justification for the extreme violence that displaced, decimated, and enslaved millions of people across centuries of conquest; this ideology proved vital to the founding, growth, and imperialist ventures of the United States. The racial hierarchy conveyed in these sculptures was embraced by those in power in the building they adorned—it was evident in the legislation taking place inside, including the establishment of the reservation system.⁷ As art historian Vivien Green Fryd noted in her extensive study of these sculptures, “By rendering a militant Indian in *Rescue* at a time when actual warfare had flared, Greenough supplied, in visual mythic terms, the rationale for the government’s Indian policies.”⁸

Once we acknowledge what these two monuments represent, the historic scene in the photograph of Lincoln’s inauguration becomes deeply disturbing, prompting us to think more critically about the origins of national myths and, more specifically, about Lincoln’s legacy as the Great Emancipator and savior of the Union. History itself is narrative, always infused with a particular point of view and ever complicated, but national myths, which are so often confused with history, are necessarily one-dimensional. National myths fixate on one aspect of a historical event and dangerously simplify, heroize, and repackage it for broad consumption, without attending to the contradictions and intricacies of reality. Though he delivered the Emancipation Proclamation, was Lincoln not at times ambivalent about ending slavery, and did he not consider accommodating it to save the Union? And did he not attempt to expatriate emancipated African Americans to a small island off the coast of Haiti?⁹ And what about Lincoln’s central role in the Dakota Thirty-Eight?¹⁰ Recognizing that Lincoln’s inauguration was bracketed by two overtly racist, anti-Native monuments might change how we think about this president who sent thirty-eight Dakota men to the gallows the day after Christmas in 1862, the largest mass execution in the nation’s history.

Persico and Greenough’s sculptures on the Capitol facade provide a way to frame Lincoln’s presidency that shows how racism informed some of his actions. These sculptures are not unique in how they visualize racial hierarchies, and yet this phenomenon is understudied. As art historian Kirk Savage noted in his groundbreaking study of nineteenth-century American monuments, “More than any of the other arts, sculpture was embedded in the theoretical foundation of racism that supported American slavery and survived long after its demise.”¹¹ *The Shape of Power: Stories of Race and American Sculpture* asserts that sculpture is an essential yet underutilized tool for examining the societal construction of race and how it has intersected with power across the development of the United States. It positions American sculpture as a means of visualizing what political theorist Cedric J. Robinson identified as “constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power.”¹²

This essay is rooted in a close study of nineteenth-century American sculpture. By reframing interpretations of historical works, it seeks to expose the racism embedded in this genre, within its idealized neoclassical style, fictionalized romantic tropes, symbolic mediums of marble and bronze, and dehumanizing displays—all of which supported the expansionist ambitions of the United States. Sculpture intersected with attempts to forge a national cultural identity, grandiose displays of cultural achievements at world’s fairs, and flawed efforts by various institutions (including the Smithsonian) to classify humans according to phenotypic differences

in campaigns to codify race as biologically determined and into a rigorous hierarchy that privileged whiteness. As this essay charts, for the first seventy years after the nation's founding, sculpture was, in art historian Thayer Tolles's words, "in an embryonic state of development."¹³ Americans only occasionally encountered sculptures in cemeteries, private homes, and, more rarely, public parks. Until midcentury there were no art foundries in the United States, very few quarries with marble suitable for statuary, no sculpture programs in the nascent art academies, and hardly any collections or venues dedicated to sculpture.¹⁴ But by the end of the nineteenth century, sculpture in the United States had grown to be monumental in scope, scale, and influence, and prominently appeared in museums, municipal and federal commissions, international world's fairs, and town squares. This essay concludes in the present day with works by contemporary artists who critique the past by reprising racist tropes and exploring the fragility of racial constructions while also challenging the exclusionary historical definitions of sculpture.

PART ONE

Constructing Race in American Sculpture across the Long Nineteenth Century (1839-1916)

CAT. 2

Washington Indian Peace Medal (obverse), 1792, silver, 5 3/16 × 3 3/16 × 1/8 in., American Numismatic Society



Persico and Greenough's sculptures were among the first and most visible statues to adorn the US Capitol, but the campaign to decorate this edifice was a major undertaking that progressed over decades into a considerable amount of sculpture that gave shape to myths of Euro-American superiority and dominance. By 1863, Thomas Crawford's *Armed Freedom*, a female figure who wears a feathered head-dress, crowned the Capitol's dome. His *Progress of Civilization* pediment, complete with *The Dying Chief*, adorns the east entrance to the Senate wing. And Randolph Rogers's series of reliefs that celebrate the life of Columbus ornaments the immense bronze doors that stand at the east entrance. These monumental marble sculptures and bronze doors were all fabricated in Europe and imported, but a small silver peace medal commissioned during George Washington's presidency—part of the same national identity-building venture—was made in the United States [CAT. 2]. This peace medal

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FOR CENTURIES MEDALS were a part of diplomatic relations between Euro-American settlers and Indigenous peoples in what is now the United States. They symbolized power and relationships including government-to-government treaty relations, interpersonal ones, or even corporate alliances. The US government began presenting "Indian Peace Medals" to Indigenous leaders in 1789. This example is one of the earliest, featuring a portrait of President Washington offering a pipe to an anonymous, seminude Indigenous figure-type.

Behind Washington, a settler tills the earth, with a farmhouse dotting the landscape. The vignette deploys recognizable iconography that represents Native peoples as "noble savage" types and white men as civilized and rational beings who believed they could make the land useful.

was created as a diplomatic tool meant to honor recipients while expressing the power of the federal government, a device that many subsequent presidents would employ. It shows a nonspecific, nearly nude Native man making a yielding gesture to the first president and thus demonstrates how, since the nation's founding, racialized figures have appeared on sculptures made to communicate power. There are countless other examples, many beyond the scope of this essay and the exhibition.¹⁵ Whether medallion or monumental, official sculptures attached to a central seat of power have functioned as a form of statecraft.¹⁶

The neoclassical style that dominated both the architecture and the sculpture of the Capitol and other public buildings was chosen for its associations with political power. Many statesmen envisioned the young republic as the modern-day successor to the democracy of ancient Athens and republic of ancient Rome. As one survey of American architecture has explained, "Since the new nation borrowed so heavily from the form and terminology of the Roman republican government, it seemed natural that architectural forms of the Roman Republic should have been among the first taken up by American architects."¹⁷ Neoclassical architecture—with its colonnades, entablatures, niches, and pediments—suggests a rational order through a hierarchy of forms primed to be richly adorned with sculptural elements. This visual language of power was attractive to many of the founding planners of Washington, DC, and it endures today as a familiar design choice for civic structures.¹⁸

Neoclassicism, however, was not merely referencing classical antiquity; it was reinterpreting it through the lens of the power structures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As art historian Caitlin Meehye Beach has noted, "The materiality of neoclassical sculpture was inextricable from dominant racial hierarchies in Western Europe, contoured both by specific theories of scientific racism and more general associations between whiteness and the ideal body."¹⁹ Significantly, the rise of neoclassicism coincided with an era of voracious global conquest and colonization that depended on and rationalized an international slave trade predicated on physical difference. The racial prejudices that were so essential to sustaining European economic powers in the so-called age of Enlightenment informed how scholars in this period thought about ancient Mediterranean civilizations. A white supremacist worldview was superimposed on antiquity as archaeological sites were being discovered and excavated. Historian Nell Irvin Painter has noted that classical studies of this time "elevated Rome's white marble copies of Greek statuary into emblems of beauty and created a new white aesthetic," one that was ignorant of or chose to ignore the bronze and polychrome materiality of the lost Greek originals.²⁰ Painter and others have evidenced how anthropological charts featuring "images of whiteness borrowed from fine art" multiplied during the eighteenth century.²¹ As a result, "the sculpture of antiquity... became an authenticating document of a normative white body, a 'race' of white men," as Savage asserts.²² An American example of such pseudoscientific illustrations is *Scientific Charts of Mankind* (1854), which equates a sketch of the skull of a Greek person with the head of the *Apollo Belvedere*, an ancient marble sculpture of a god, as evidence of the superiority of whiteness for its association with idealized beauty and, by extension, intelligence and other virtues.²³ The chart, which mimics many European examples that preceded it, conversely positions the head of a "Negro" a level below that of the Greek Apollo, in closer proximity to the head of a young

chimpanzee. This line of thought stood as bogus evidence supporting polygenesis, the belief that humans descended from multiple, unequal points of origin.²⁴ In the nineteenth-century United States, this belief in a superiority of whiteness within the “natural” hierarchy of the human race became an important part of the rationale for enslaving African Americans.

The neoclassical style sought to emulate the aesthetics of Greco-Roman antiquity, insofar as they had been recast as racially white and materially monochromatic.²⁵ As it became popular in the highly racialized society of the United States, neoclassical sculpture proliferated this racist misreading of the classical world and frequently reinforced contemporary notions of white superiority in American society. As postcolonial and Black feminist scholar Charmaine Nelson has noted, “The nineteenth century’s stylistic dependence upon classical sculpture, broadly termed neoclassicism, located the privileging of the white body as the aesthetic paradigm of beauty. Quite simply, the term classical was not neutral, but a racialized term which activated the marginalization of blackness as its antithesis.”²⁶

Preeminent American sculptor Hiram Powers (1805–1873), who hailed from a farm in Vermont, drew on neoclassical ideals of beauty that he absorbed in Italy, where he lived and worked for most of his career, to create *America*, also known as *Liberty* [CAT. 3].²⁷ Powers’s *America* is a perfectly proportioned, idealized, full-length female nude that symbolizes the entire country and is, quite simply, a personification of racial whiteness. As did many nineteenth-century artists, Powers conceived of race as something that could be measured in the body. A devotee of phrenology, a study rooted in the belief that a person’s character and intelligence could be assessed from the size, shape, and features of one’s skull, Powers modeled his ideal figures according to guidelines of this racist pseudoscience.²⁸

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He conceived of *America* in pristine white Italian marble, a material that holds deep symbolic meanings. Several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European and American writers and intellectuals obsessed over the material whiteness of marble, associating it with moral purity and beauty. One reviewer noted it was “buoyant with immortal life,” while Nathaniel Hawthorne called it “pure, white radiance,” and Hegel dubbed it “congealed light.”²⁹ Johann Joachim Winckelmann, an eighteenth-century German art historian and ardent proponent of neoclassicism, tellingly quipped, “a beautiful body will be all the more beautiful the whiter it is.”³⁰ Physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual superiority were attached to the white body, as the color of the stone and racial whiteness were conflated through these idealized marble figures. Whiteness was thus constructed as a series of entitlements that were believed to be naturally occurring and reflected in one’s physical appearance.

Powers crowned his *America* with a diadem of thirteen stars to represent the British colonies that formed the first states, tying the political origins of the nation to this racialized body. *America* illustrates how such a sculpture might function as statecraft. A bill commissioning Powers to sculpt *America* was successfully presented to the US Senate in 1855 by Senator Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, a friend of the artist.³¹ Some expressed that this monumental figure of a woman in white marble would be a perfect “embodiment of our political creed” and “the idea of free, popular, constitutional government.”³² Powers wrote, “The figure itself embodies the youth and vigour [*sic*] of our great country and I have made it as beautiful as I could.”³³ *America*’s

(continued...)

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