

# COMMEMORATIVE SCULPTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 8-12

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## TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

### I. UNIT OVERVIEW

The history of commemorative public sculpture and monuments in the United States is a fascinating story. Americans are proud of their national memorials, like the Lincoln, Jefferson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Vietnam Veterans Memorial located in the nation's capital. But small communities across America also take pride in their public sculptures and monuments. These monuments and memorials are a part of the fabric of American culture. In 1986, when the Statue of Liberty was restored, many Americans began looking at their own communities for treasures they needed to protect. Out of this was born the Save Outdoor Sculpture Project, sponsored in part by the Smithsonian Institution. Sculptures and monuments once overlooked were now brought to the forefront of many communities' consciousness. As such, sculptures have been restored at a rapid rate during the 1990s.

Memorials and sculptures not only tell us about the deeds of the past, but they also help us examine our society as it existed at the time these memorials were dedicated. On occasion they can also stir our imagination to rethink the past by reflecting the natural tensions that are part of a democratic society.

This unit should help students see and understand the importance of commemorative public sculpture in the United States. Using examples of some of the greatest pieces located across the United States, students will explore how and why monuments are created and dedicated. They will recognize the place of consensus by either individual communities or memorial committees and will understand that public sculpture in this country is client-patron driven. Students will also explore how controversies arise pertaining to the changing meaning of monuments in relation to our history.

### II. UNIT CONTEXT

It is best to use this unit near the end of a survey course in United States history since, in some cases, students will need to be familiar with the historical context of certain people, themes, and ideas. Using this material would assist teachers in pulling together the wealth of material in United States history that has been studied during the school year. Teachers might also wish to use some of the lessons independently, during the school year, when they are studying topic specific themes, such as the West or Lincoln and the Civil War.

### III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY

*Commemorative Sculpture in the United States* is a thematic unit examining several standards in the *National Standards for United States History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, National Center for History in the Schools, 1996) that investigate various aspects of popular culture in the study of American history. Material for this unit includes numerous photographs of public sculpture providing students with the opportunity to examine visual data to clarify, illustrate, and elaborate upon information presented in historical narratives. The unit specifically addresses **Historical Thinking Standard 2** in comprehending a variety of historical sources. Students will better appreciate historical perspectives by: 1) describing the past on its own terms through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through diaries, letters, and the arts; and 2) considering the historical context in which the event unfolded—the values, outlook, options, and contingencies of that time and place.

### IV. OBJECTIVES

1. To study historical documents, archival images, and other visual material in order to experience history as a dynamic discipline which studies, interprets, and debates the meaning of human events and through those, humanity's collective past.
2. To recognize the importance of historical memory and commemoration in the United States and how this reflects our place in the world as a people and a nation.
3. To understand how the arts reflect the values of a society at a given place and time.
4. To explain how certain major themes in United States history have been commemorated.
5. How our democratic principles are embodied in public sculpture and monuments by a wide range and variety of images from across the United States.

### V. LESSON PLANS

1. Commemoration in the American Democracy
2. An Enduring American Image—The Minuteman
3. The American Pantheon
4. Icons of the West
5. Soldiers of the Civil War
6. The Creation of a National Shrine—The Lincoln Memorial

## VI. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON COMMEMORATIVE SCULPTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

Perhaps nothing in the American cultural landscape is more striking than our sculptural monuments. They were at many times in the past, and even in some locales today, regarded as jewels, venerated for the messages they delivered and the visions their promoters articulated. Public sculpture was this country's first mass-appeal art-form. These works, created and erected to pay tribute, to instruct, to educate, to excite, are a national treasure.

It is estimated that there are over fifteen thousand outdoor sculptures in American cities, towns and villages. Whether for local impact or countrywide appeal, these handmade images stand as eloquent metaphors of our development as a nation. These provocative works of art—in bustling squares and bristling traffic circles, in serene courthouse lawns and on barren concrete plazas—are an integral part of America's cultural consciousness. Public monuments are acts of celebration—symbols of a country articulating its national identity, with chest-thumping bravado or reverential understatement.

While some monuments have fallen victim to a changing standard of aesthetics and others neglected by shifts in our urban cityscape, public sculptures embodied the rhythm and energy of their age. In its broadest stroke, public sculpture joins the didactic and the decorative. Monuments are embodiments of private tribute and chauvinistic celebration. They helped to define our national character. They address an insatiable need to remember heroes, to promote points of view, to honor well-earned and fleeting victories, to acknowledge, on occasion, shortcomings and even failings. Whether praising or remembering, embellishing or documenting, public sculptures pay homage to reputations earned as well as the talents of artists who translate the instructions of the behind-the-scenes sponsors into tangible reality.

Collectively public statues are a three-dimensional honor-roll of America's movers and shakers, dreamers and leaders, celebrating the achievements of great men (and too-few women) and the time-tested causes that have captured our national attention. The story of why and how is as important as who, what, where and when.

Much of America's best figurative sculpture was produced during a three-generation period that began feverishly at the end of the Civil War. This explosion was aided by the arrival in the 1880s of foreign-born bronze casting experts like Riccardo Bertelli and Henry Aucaigne, founders of Roman Bronze Works and Henry-Bonnard Bronze Company, respectively, and by a talented group of stone carvers—the five Piccirilli Brothers (who worked in the Bronx, New York from 1888 to the early 1940s).

It is important to recognize that public sculpture is a patron-generated art. Sculptors never sat in their studios, dreaming up compositions or speculating on projects. The sculptor never initiates; he reacts to a vaguely worded inquiry or responds to a detail-laden proposal. As work progressed, the patron remained engaged; suggestions, refinements, even wholesale changes could be (and often were) proposed by the client.

Inexplicably this system rarely stifled creativity—artist and patron flourished as symbiotic partners. Never having the luxury of working in seclusion, public sculptors made a virtue of their goldfish-bowl existence. Whether over-the-shoulder meddling or circumspect monitoring, the patron's involvement was a given. The step-by-step production from small design to finished monument provided predictable points of contact, timetables for reviews and schedules of payment.

The task of creating a public memorial is a many-layered undertaking that demands the sculptor be an artistic performer as well as a businessman, contractor, accountant, supervisor and publicist. Far different expectations are asked of a painter who often works in seclusion in a studio, needing only at the end of production to interest a prospective purchaser or to secure a gallery display space. An architect, who negotiates a contract with reassuring words and well-worked renderings often disappears as the builder erects an elegant home or a contractor constructs a grand office building.

The everyday operations of making monuments demand the sculptor be both hands-on laborer and nuts-and-bolts manager, bookkeeper and press publicist. The sculptor became both jack and master of all trades. Except for the upfront payment on signing the contract, funding liability favored the patron. Throughout the labor-intensive modeling stages, when expenses for materials and extra studio services were greatest, monies for the sculptor only trickled in. Only after the monument was erected and the sculptor's hands-on work long-finished was the largest installment (often as much as fifty percent) tendered. In spite of the unevenness of this monetary playing field, most practitioners of public sculpture prospered.

Making monuments is a multi-stepped operation, commencing with a patron's first queries and ending, quite often, several years later at an elaborate dedication ceremony. A larger-than-life bronze statue begins as a hand-sized maquette. A two-step enlargement follows as the sculptor creates a midsize, "working" model and a full-scale statue. Procedures hardly vary—modeling in malleable clay, then reproducing the completed work in more durable (but still fragile) plaster.

The early development of monumental sculpture in America was inextricably linked to the technical advances in bronze manufacturing brought on by the Civil War. Prior to 1860, most of America's sculptures were carved in marble for display indoors. As the cannon-casting industry retooled, the great majority of America's monuments were made in bronze.

Creating public sculpture is not a dream-world exercise; it is a labor-intensive activity that involves the artist intimately in both the mental and the menial. From courting a client to taking the obligatory bow as the dedication bunting is raised, American sculptors became one-person concert performers. In conceiving and manufacturing public monuments, American sculptors became three-dimensional fact-finders and myth-makers. Unlike the biographer or historian, who might use thousands of words or scores of illustrations to defend a thesis or evaluate a career, public sculptors distilled the essence of their subject in a single summarizing moment; everything available, instantly accessible and irrefutably permanent.