

Monuments to Notable Women: Increasing Female Representation in Public Space

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Who and what a society commemorates tell a great deal about its collective history, identity and values. This paper deals with the lack of visibility and representation women receive in “official” memory through the lens of public statues. Statues to notable men dominate the landscape of cities and towns across the world, while the majority of the “female” representation is through allegorical figures depicting ideals like justice or liberty. I follow the efforts of feminist organizations in San Francisco, New York City and Sofia, Bulgaria that are working to correct this imbalance by demanding more statues to important historical women, and argue that this very public form of inequality is important to address despite criticisms that statues can be somewhat irrelevant to the larger cause of gaining equal representation. Seeing historically celebrated women taking a distinct place in the public landscape not only instills confidence in young women but reinforces among all people that women are valued, and they have been and can continue to be in positions of power and make a difference in society moving forward.

Introduction

In the past year, movements have emerged around the world demanding more public statues dedicated to notable women. These campaigns are fighting against a long-standing tradition of commemoration that has largely left women out of the picture. Public landscapes in any town or city are more often than not populated by monuments to historically celebrated men, pointing to a male-centric depiction of history that prevailed when they were erected and still has a heavy influence today. Currently, the most prevalent recognition that women receive is through allegorical forms, unrepresentative of any realistic woman residing in the societies these

statues inhabit. In this essay, I will argue that the current gender imbalance in public statues and the low representation of notable women in local and national narratives is representative of the patriarchal structures women are still fighting to dismantle, in this case through feminist organisations in cities such as San Francisco, New York and Sofia, Bulgaria pushing for monuments dedicated to real women. I will also argue that fighting for increased female visibility throughout the public landscape allows the integration of women into these “official” narratives, both giving a platform to their historically devalued perspective and providing tangible, visual encouragement and confidence to a younger generation that women are impactful and powerful members of society.

Monuments, “Official” Histories and Gender Dynamics

The monuments erected in an area—be it a local community, a city or a nation—provide one way to communicate the history of that area through physical reminders of what is seen as important to the people there. As historian Daniel Sherman described, “commemoration as a practice seeks to reinforce the solidarity and coherence of a particular community... [and] forges a consensus version of a past event or events.”¹ Who actually decides what that “consensus version” of the past looks like and what narrative ends up dominating in a society, however, is inevitably bound up in power dynamics, with gender always being an inescapable differentiation.² Specifically in reference to art history, Linda Nochlin argued that the “white Western male viewpoint [is] unconsciously accepted as *the* viewpoint,” generally excluding the perspectives of women and minorities.³

Particularly in the United States, a large portion of the memorials and indicators of these biased histories were erected at the turn of the twentieth century. Lindsay Shannon, an art historian, noted that “in the face of a rapidly changing population, the desire to construct a functional cityscape that promoted a common history was at the root of many civic projects.”⁴

1 Daniel Sherman, “Monuments, Mourning and Masculinity in France after World War I,” *Gender & History* 8, no. 1 (April 1996): 82.

2 Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, “Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction,” *Signs* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 6.

3 Linda Nochlin, “Why have there been no great female artists,” *ARTnews* (January 1971, reprinted June 30, 2015).

4 Lindsay Shannon, “Monuments to the “New Women”: public art and female image building in America, 1876-1940,” PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) thesis (University of Iowa, 2013): 96.

Monuments became an effective tool in those projects, and the subsequently commemorated figures made inescapably clear that white men dictated this 'common history'. Apart from being completely unrealistic and idealized allegorical forms, women were largely left out. In San Francisco, for instance, only two of the 87 public statues populating the city represent real women: the lone female mayor Dianne Feinstein and Florence Nightingale.⁵ In the city's major park, only one woman stands: the generic 'Pioneer Mother' created for the 1915 World Fair.⁶ Similarly, the only female figures in New York City's Central Park are Alice in Wonderland, Shakespeare's Juliet and Mother Goose.⁷ In Sofia, Bulgaria, there are no statues of real women at all.⁸ As the examples of the fictional female figures show, however, women face more than just a lack of representation: allegorical monuments dilute the small percentage of female statues that do exist.

Of the 6,900 outdoor sculptures recorded in the catalogue of the Smithsonian American Art Museum Inventories, the 555 that are female often take vague, representative forms of ideas like 'Self Denial', a female figure outside the New Haven County Courthouse, or 'Inner Light' in Silver Springs, Maryland.⁹ While male statues and images can stand alone as individuals, politically and socially enabled to have command over their identities, females tend to depict the universal and generic, representative of the nation's ideals or even an abstract version of the nation itself, famously including figures like Mother Ireland and Marianne of France.¹⁰ These depictions rarely even get real names and are certainly not representative of women in the area or their real experiences during the period they were erected.¹¹ A statue of a woman in these contexts—fictional figures crafted in classical styles decided upon and shaped by men—is often just a conduit

5 "Civic Arts Collection Checklist: Monuments and Memorials," San Francisco Arts Commission (June 12, 2017).

6 Heather Knight, "S.F.'s Monuments to Male Supremacy: The City's Public Art," *The San Francisco Chronicle* (June 13, 2017).

7 Maya Rhodan, "Inside the Push for More Public Statues of Notable Women," *Time* (August 17, 2017).

8 "Pop-up sculptures reclaim public space for women in Sofia," *Bulgarian Helsinki Committee* (March 24, 2017).

9 Rhodan, "Inside the Push for More Public Statues of Notable Women."

10 Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Vintage, 1996): 12.

11 *Ibid.*

for a greater message: her body has been appropriated to portray whatever symbolism the artist or commissioner chose.

The demands for commissioning more monuments to real women can thus be, in a sense, a reclaiming of the female body. As Peg Brand, an art historian and theorist, argued: feminist art challenges “depictions of women by which male artists stereotype them as purely sexual, passive and dependent; and second... [it promotes] positive feminine attributes, accomplishments and autonomy.”¹² This definition easily encompasses public commemoration: allegorical statues, while often presenting images of powerful female figures, can strip the agency from women by denying any semblance of the real female experience. The push to reform this issue, however, recognises and celebrates women’s strength, autonomy and impact on history not only through the act of commemoration itself but by installing physical reminders of great women that have been hidden all too often from official narratives of remembrance.

Moves to Integrate Women into Public Space

In cities like San Francisco, New York City, and Sofia, feminist groups alongside select government officials and activist organizations are taking steps to correct this imbalance. Spurred on by his aides Margaux Kelly and Kanishka Karunaratne, San Francisco senator Mark Farrell introduced a resolution that would commit the city to increase female representation across the public sphere by 30 percent in 2020.¹³ The first act was to install a statue of Maya Angelou—a writer, poet, and civil rights activist—outside the city’s main library, along with the creation of a fund to erect more statues of women in the future. So far, the idea has garnered a positive reaction. City resident Zulaikha Khalil noted, “I think [the statue] would be really amazing, especially that it’s an African American female...I walk around San Francisco noticing there are a lot of male statues. I’m like, ‘And you are who?’”¹⁴ The fact that putting up a monument to an impactful woman is the first step in a plan to integrate more women into public service is significant, as is the widespread public support. It highlights the profound effect that visibility and recognition can have in the fight for equality and increased female representation in the public sphere.

12 Peg Brand, “Feminist Art Epistemologies: Understanding Feminist Art,” *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 168.

13 Knight, “S.F.’s Monuments to Male Supremacy.” Rhodan, “Inside the Push for More Public Statues of Notable Women.”

14 *Ibid.*

New York City similarly hosts a group—appropriately entitled *Where are the Women?*¹⁵—attempting to combat public gender imbalance. In this case, the group wants to erect a monument in Central Park to prominent American suffragists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.¹⁵ Set to be unveiled in 2020 on the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th amendment—the legislation that gave women the right to vote in the United States—this commemoration has a huge symbolic weight. Celebrating the first time women could have a recognized political voice, two women who were instrumental in that regard are now posthumously blazing a trail for women in a field once again dominated by men. In a location visited by nearly 42 million people a year, the monument would publicize the pioneering contributions these women helped make not only for the advancement of women but for society as a whole.¹⁶ Thus, the statue is not just a memento to and for women exclusively, but for *everyone* to learn from, appreciate and celebrate.

In Sofia, a similar campaign—artist Irina Erka's *MONUMENT #1* series—took a somewhat different approach in March of 2017. Supported by the human rights group *Bulgarian Helsinki Committee* and the art activism organization *Fine Acts*, Erka installed seven sculptures across the capital city overnight. The series was designed to raise awareness about the lack of female monuments in Sofia by scattering brightly coloured busts in central locations throughout the city.¹⁷ Erka claimed her intervention worked to resist the erasure of women's accomplishments from public memory. She noted, “the sculptures are a portrait of me, as I wanted to take a strong personal, public stance as a contemporary woman and artist, and say enough...[however], they are only marked by a sign “The first monument of a woman in Sofia.” In these sculptures, I am every woman.”¹⁸ These temporary monuments also serve a more long-lasting purpose: in April 2018, they will be exhibited and auctioned off in a city gallery to fund the first permanent monument to a real woman in Sofia.¹⁹ This intervention

15 “Central Park: Where are the women?” Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony Statue Fund Inc. (2017).

16 *Ibid.*

17 “Pop-up sculptures reclaim public space for women in Sofia.” See Figure 1 and Figure 2, Appendix I.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.* Options for the statue include notable early 20th century Bulgarian women's rights activists Ekaterina Karavelova, Vela Blagoeva, Anna Karima and Vera Zlaterava, as well as the first Bulgarian female architect Victoria Angelova and

made headlines internationally, awakening people to a disparity that can all too often pass by unnoticed.²⁰ Erka's colourful busts served to make that inequality clear and stir up demands for women to expose the subtle exclusion that has been undermining their achievements for years.

Artistic feminist interventions against male-dominated public spaces, like those described above, have been taking place for decades. As Lindsay Shannon argued, "the rise of the Second Wave feminist movement and scholarship in women's history has created a demand for new forms of public art that engage with gender issues."²¹ Since the 1980s, for example, the Guerilla Girls—an anonymous female activist group—have highlighted a wide variety of issues in the art world, including the male-to-female artist disparity in galleries.²² They claim to present "provocative images and statements, backed up by information, that give the audience a chance to think about an issue and come to a conclusion, hopefully on the side of feminism and social change."²³ Similarly, by collecting and circulating statistics depicting the gender imbalance in public statues in cities around the world, feminist groups can garner public support and outrage towards this particular manifestation of inequality and encourage people to push for greater inclusion.

In the discussion surrounding the relationship between women and institutions that have traditionally excluded and devalued them, however, it is not unwarranted to be sceptical about achieving equality by erecting statues. Changing mentalities and altering biases is a long-term process, and for some, putting up monuments to women that have been historically overlooked may seem like a waste of time that could be better spent serving the advancement of living women rather than the commemoration of women passed. This discussion begs the question, are these efforts futile?

physicist Elisaveta Karamihailova.

- 20 See Van Badham, "Monumental women: let's fix how we memorialise female achievement," *The Guardian* (October 6, 2017). Also, Jonathan Jones, "Feminism doesn't need more female statues—it needs political action," *The Guardian* (March 27, 2017), among other international reactions.
- 21 Shannon, "Monuments to the New Woman," 188.
- 22 Guerilla Girls, "Do women still have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?" Guerilla Girls (New York City: 2012). See Figure 3, Appendix I.
- 23 "Feminist Activist Art: A Roundtable Forum," *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 4. "Our Story," Guerilla Girls (2017).

Making a Difference

In a response to Erka's art installations in Sofia, journalist Jonathan Jones wrote an article in *The Guardian* arguing that the push to erect female monuments is a wasted endeavor. He claimed that "permanent statues don't advance feminism—they trap people in the past...statues don't hold public memory. They politely bury it."²⁴ His point rested on the idea that once the statues go up, they immediately begin fading into the background, becoming inconsequential in the grand scheme of active gender politics. Admittedly, it is likely that every day people pass by statues of figures whose significance—or even name—they do not know. The point where Jones miscalculated, however, was his claim that attempts to correct the gender imbalance in statues will not make an impact. People do take notice and care—even if it takes a surprise installation or campaign to point it out to them. Michelle Jeffers, the spokesperson for the San Francisco Main Library, said "I hadn't paid a ton of attention to [the fact that there were only two female statues out of 87 in the city], but now that I know about it, I can't unlearn it."²⁵ Statues may often fade into the background, but political movements can drag them back to the forefront of public scrutiny.

In a recent dramatic controversy that serves as a potent example, the statues memorializing Confederate soldiers in the United States have become a major point of contention between those who see them as markers of their Southern heritage and those who see them as remnants of a racist past that need to be taken down for the country to progress.²⁶ In the midst of movements like Black Lives Matter, the social and political protests against police violence and the rise of the "alternative right" in the United States, these statues that had largely stayed out of the news in the past suddenly became the focus of a national crisis, proving that they are definitely not—as Jones noted—devoid of contemporary meaning.²⁷ Just as the political climate in the United States is renewing these monuments with a sense of importance, the feminist movement is instilling an urgent importance in monuments to women. Even in the periods where these monuments may fall out of the news cycles, part of the importance of these demands to erect female statues also lies in just calling out the disparity in the first place. Progress is made by raising awareness and cultivating a shift

24 Jones, "Feminism Doesn't Need More Female Statues."

25 Knight, "S.F.'s Monuments to Male Supremacy."

26 Rhodan, "Inside the Push for More Public Statues of Notable Women."

27 Jones, "Feminism Doesn't Need More Female Statues."

in mentality towards even just noticing inequality where it quietly exists in the background. As Rosie Rios, the former Treasurer of the United States, powerfully put it, “open your eyes, see what you don’t see, and change it... reinvent visibility.”²⁸ Memory and memorialization can be powerful agents of change.

While the notability of public monuments may ebb and flow alongside political movements, they nonetheless hold a certain subtle power at all times. The call for greater public female visibility serves to inspire and instill confidence in women and girls on a day-to-day basis. The lack of female monuments can send the message that female accomplishments are not significant enough to respect or recognize. Journalist Nilanjana Roy wrote in the *Financial Times*, “this goes beyond political correctness: what children and teenagers see of the world shapes their view of it, their sense of the place they should occupy.”²⁹ Right now in the United States, women make up only 20 percent of the U.S. Congress, 20 percent of mayors and 24 percent of statewide elected executive offices. For women of colour, that number is even less: they comprise only 7.4 percent of Congress members altogether and 36.5 percent of female Congress members.³⁰ Part of the strategy in increasing these numbers and making real headway in the fight for gender equality is normalizing the very image of women in leadership roles. Karunaratne, the aide who helped inspire the San Francisco resolution, noted that having more female faces in public is hugely influential: “like with the *Wonder Woman* movie, women are freaking out about how now they understand why men feel strong and powerful. It’s because that’s constantly reinforced by men in superhero, powerful roles.”³¹ If people, not just women and girls, see images of strong and influential females reinforced around them, it sends a message of equality that significantly affects the way both boys and girls are socialized.

28 Rosie Rios, “Visibility Reinvented,” *TEDxBermuda* (TEDx Talks, July 27, 2017). YouTube.

29 Nilanjana Roy, “Why aren’t there more statues of women?” *The Financial Times* (June 7, 2017).

30 Rhodan, “Inside the Push for More Public Statues of Notable Women.” See also “Women in the U.S. Congress 2017,” Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics (2017)., and “Women in Government,” Catalyst: Workplaces that Work for Women (2017). For rankings of all the countries in the world (including that of Bulgaria, where 24 percent of women hold office in the National Assembly), see “Women in National Parliaments,” Inter-Parliamentary Union (October 2017).

31 Knight, “S.F.’s Monuments to Male Supremacy.”

Reinforcing visible gender equality is critical in inspiring more young women to enter politics and the public domain. In a 2017 TEDx speech, Rios described a Science Magazine article she read that highlighted the importance of children having visual representations of notable women, not just men, for inspiration.³²

“the premise [of the article] is this: gendered notions of brilliance are acquired early and have an immediate effect on children’s interest... six-year-old girls are less likely than boys to think their gender is really, really smart. Six-year-old girls avoid activities where you have to be really, really smart... Whether it’s their teacher, their peers, whether it’s something they’re not seeing on their [school] walls, their confidence is affected. And it makes a difference... [this goes] beyond a feminist issue—this is an equity issue.”³³

Whether in school or out in the city streets and parks, there is an unlimited number of male role models in the public eye for young men to emulate. Boys see that men have made impactful decisions and accomplished great feats throughout history; they see that it can and has been done, time and time again. For young women, however, it is a different story. The percentage of women compared to men in powerful, visible decision-making roles in society is drastically lower than the percentage of men, and while inspirational and courageous women have made and are continuing to make incredible contributions to the world despite the obstacles they face, they are recognized far less than their male counterparts. Seeing and acknowledging the accomplishments that women have made throughout history in school and scattered throughout public space inspires confidence in young women while instilling in *all* young people the idea of equality and respect for the contributions of both men and women moving forward.

32 Lin Bian, Sarah-Jane Leslie and Andrei Cimpian, “Gender Stereotypes about Intellectual Abilities Emerge Early and Influence Children’s Interests,” *Science* 355, no. 6323 (January 2017): 389-391.

33 Rios, “Visibility Reinvented.”

Conclusion

Boosting the representation of historical women through public monuments not only dismantles the sexist and privileged narrative that the main drivers of society are more often than not white men, but works to alter the subtle institutionalized visual cues that can deter the confidence of young girls and women. Projects and interventions like those in San Francisco, New York and Sofia are helping people become more aware of this biased historical approach that has become altogether too commonplace. Women are worth more than the abysmal representation they receive in public commemorations and the appropriation of their bodies to convey impersonal ideals and symbols of the state. The monuments that communities erect and the things they choose to commemorate cry *these are our points of pride, and this is our national story*. Women are an integral part of that story, and the visual confirmation of that is a key step in promoting equality. The feminist agenda will not be satisfied just because the ratio of male-to-female statues in a park is finally equal, but these campaigns to erect more female monuments can, and have, jumpstarted public awareness of institutionalized inequality. Today people are seeing more female leadership through statues and commemorations, but tomorrow people will see more female leadership in decision-making bodies across all levels of society.

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