

▶ *Plumed Serpent*,
San José, California.
Photo by Dave Lepori.





PUBLIC ART AND THE CULTURE WARS

by Kerry Adams Hapner, Director of Cultural Affairs,
Deputy Director of Economic Development, City of San Jose

This article originally appeared in the spring 2020 issue of *Arts Link*, the magazine for Americans for the Arts members, and is reprinted with permission. To learn more about *Arts Link*, visit AmericansForTheArts.org/ArtsLink.

Across the United States, politics of place, art, and culture are dynamic. What is considered truth, fact, perspective, and historical record depends on who has power. With changing demographics, new generations, and evolving cultural values, new voices question who and what should be commemorated. This tension of competing cultural perspectives exists in our nation's culture wars in which different constituencies demand public art that is reflective and inclusive of their identity and experiences. From the National Mall to the town square, public art holds power in punctuating identity, history, and public memory.

Consider the controversial case studies of *Plumed Serpent*, also known as *Quetzalcoatl*, in San José, California, and the Robert E. Lee Monument in Charlottesville, Virginia. The controversies surrounding these works reflect evolving generational views and must be considered not only within their localized battles, but in the greater national context of the culture wars and how these works reflect changing public values of our collective historic narrative and identity.



QUICK LOOK

Artist Robert Graham (1938–2008)

▣ Born in Mexico City, [Robert Graham](#) moved to San José at the age of 12 and studied art at San José State University and the San Francisco Art Institute, and ultimately settled in Los Angeles. Most known for his figurative bronze sculptures, Graham's career grew quickly through gallery and museum exhibitions and high profiled public art commissions, most notably the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington, D.C. He became one of the greatest artists of his time.

Photo © 2020 Robert Graham Studio/Estate, Artists Rights Society (ARS) NY.

U.S. CULTURE WARS AND LOCALIZED BATTLES

In the early 1990s, the political landscape in the United States was increasingly polarized by competing ideological worldviews—secular progressives and religious traditionalists. These “culture wars” contested polemic issues such as abortion, LGBTQ rights, the right to bear arms, representation of the Confederate flag, and publicly funded art. In his speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention, conservative presidential candidate Pat Buchanan declared, “There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself.” His call to action was to take America back “city by city.”

PLUMED SERPENT: A CASE STUDY

Located in downtown San José's central Plaza de Cesar Chavez, artist Robert Graham's *Plumed Serpent*, a sculpture of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl, was installed by the San José Redevelopment Agency (SJRDA) in 1994. Since its conception, the artwork has been a lightning rod for civic discourse, which now offers a generational view of how public art elicits animated democracy and reflects social issues. To some, it is a beautiful homage to Mexican culture by a leading artist, while others debate its artistic merit, religious symbolism, cost, and more.

San José's rapid changes in population, diversity, and redevelopment play out in the artwork's cultural context. By 1990, the city's population had grown to 782,000—eight times its size in over four decades. Its ethnic demographics, too, quickly evolved. In 1970, San José

was over 90% white. By 1990, the population diversified with about 25% Latinx, 20% Asian and Pacific Islander, and 5% African American. Today it is a minority-majority city, with no one ethnic group comprising a majority of the population.

How a community responds to a work of art starts with each of its citizens and their set of schemas, an evolving set of cognitive structures that organize past stimuli that create experiences and reactions, which collectively reverberate and inform public value. The tale of the serpent is intriguing and tainted by urban myths perpetuated by the media and public discourse. Thus, the myths become a normalized part of public discourse.

Plumed Serpent represents a Mesoamerican symbol of the union of the snake's terrestrial environment (earth) with the bird's celestial environment (sky). Other associations with Quetzalcoatl are fertility, learning, knowledge,

merchants, arts, and crafts. Commissioned in the aftermath of another public art controversy, the Thomas Fallon Statue, which was protested by members of the Mexican American community as a symbol of conquest, Graham sought to heal the wounds with a positive symbol of good celebrated in Mesoamerican culture.

Sparking an emotional religious debate, *Plumed Serpent* became a localized battleground in a national culture war. Led by the U.S.

QUICK LOOK

Schemas

■ In *The Social Imperative*, Stanford scholar Dr. Paula Moya writes “schemas will be shared with others who are similarly situated within a particular society—so, for instance, racial, gender, religious, and class schemas are often shared across a demographic group.” Schemas inform collective discourse within complex, pluralistic communities; enable one to fill in gaps of information; and provide a means to interpret and evaluate artwork.



QUICK LOOK

Thomas Fallon

■ In 1988, SJRDA commissioned a statue of Captain Thomas Fallon on horseback raising the U.S. flag in San José in 1846, when California was still part of Mexico. Artist Robert Glen's statue commemorated a man whose significance is contested amongst historians and community members. The artwork provoked debate about representation, perspective, public memory, belonging, and inclusion. In 1990, Vice Mayor Blanca Alvarado wrote to the RDA board, “historical fact has many meanings. A significant number of our community finds the act of conquest portrayed by the statue to be offensive...the raising of the flag points to the subjugation of the ancestors of many of our citizens.”

Thomas Fallon Statue, San José, California.
Photo by Dave Lepori.

Justice Foundation, an organization that advances conservative right-wing political causes, a lawsuit was filed against the City of San José and the SJRDA, alleging that the artwork was a violation of the separation of church and state protected by the First Amendment. Plaintiffs claimed the work was a religious symbol of an evil Aztec culture. Members of the far-right evangelical Christian community protested the installation of the work.



➔ **Robert E. Lee Statue.**
Photo courtesy City
of Charlottesville.

Led by the former head of Operation Rescue’s 1993 campaign opposing abortion in San José, a new organization called Word in Warfare Ministries held a four-day around-the-clock prayer vigil at the site of the sculpture. Supporters of the artwork dismissed these acts as political propaganda. The U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California ruled against the plaintiffs, citing that the work was an artistic interpretation and not a religious symbol. This court decision was appealed but upheld in 1996 by the U.S. Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit. *Plumed Serpent* was dedicated, yet controversial public discourse continued to swirl around it.

Within weeks, media outlets ran articles, cartoons, and letters reflecting a spectrum of opinions about the work. The local press ran sensational headlines, including a piece by the editorial board of *The Mercury News* titled “Tale of the Serpent: How City Hall turned monumental art into a lump” with cartoons associating the artwork with excrement. Over time, the pejorative reference took on urban legend and overtook the positive Mesoamerican symbol, defaming not only the artwork but the culture it celebrated. Ever since, the artwork has become a cautionary tale of politics and public values. It is not the artwork that is controversial, but the issues surrounding it.

In an era in which we are experiencing a resurgence of white supremacy, we must be vigilant about language. Once normalized, defamation can lead to ethnic superiority and marginalization. Culture is in the conversation.

A NEW GENERATION OF CULTURE WARS

These culture wars impacted generations to come. The modern debates over public art are a powerful symbol of memory, identity, and public value. For example, in efforts to remove testaments to glorified and false narratives that promote bias and racism, the City Council of Charlottesville, Virginia, voted to remove several statues, including one of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. The City Council's decision to remove the Lee statue catalyzed multiple high-profile protests by members of that community and national white supremacy groups, including the Ku Klux Klan. In August 2017, the Unite the Right white supremacy rally held at the site tragically culminated when a neo-Nazi man rammed his car into a crowd of protestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring at least 28 people. The State of Virginia blocked the statue's removal, citing it as a historic war memorial

QUICK LOOK

Suggested Reading

- *The Devil in Silicon Valley*, Stephen J. Pitti
- *Memorials to Shattered Myths*, Harriet Senie
- *The Social Imperative*, Paula M. L. Moya
- *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, Kirk Savage

protected by state law. The decision was appealed by Charlottesville and a new state legislature passed an amendment to [*House Bill 1537*](#) enabling local control, which Governor Ralph Northam signed into law on April 11, 2020.

OUR IMPERATIVE

Our national culture wars are high-stakes debates being waged at all levels of government. We must ask whose memory is being commemorated. How does that historic narrative reflect and inform public value? Whose memory is being served and how does that shape public opinion, systems of power, and cultural inclusion? As culture evolves through demographic, technological, political, environmental, and social shifts, we have a civic and moral imperative to create an equitable society of inclusion through the arts. This imperative is crucial. Our future depends on it.

QUICK LOOK

Art, History, and Community Dialogue

- ▶ The monument to Confederate general Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia, became the focal point for a violent, racism-fueled clash that brought to the forefront the existence and legacy of divisive monuments in communities across the United States. In response, Americans for the Arts released a [**Statement on the Intersection of the Arts, History, and Community Dialogue**](#) to support community-driven discussions on who and what is reflected in public artworks.