VISUAL ARTS SEP 2

Freedman's Cemetery sculptor on Dallas Confederate statue: Let the community decide

David Newton, Special Contributor

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Public art in a democracy is meant to be discussed and debated by the community in which taxpayer funds are used to commission or maintain them. At its core, public art represents the values, aspirations and history that a community wants to present to its citizens and to the outside world.

Public monuments are political by nature and have always been a lightning rod for high emotions during times of political stress, which we are now experiencing in our country.

Over the past year, a sculpture of Jefferson Davis at the University of Texas at Austin has been moved several times because of student demands. In April, it was finally placed in a more historical context on campus.

Recently there were large demonstrations in Charlottesville, Va., over the proposed removal of the Gen. Robert E. Lee sculpture. This demonstration ended in the murder of one woman and the injury of many. It happened that the murderer, and many of the other perpetrators of violence, were not from Charlottesville or from the state of Virginia, but outsiders.

Dallas Parks department workers pack up after removing graffiti from the Robert E. Lee statue in Lee Park, in Dallas, on Saturday morning, Aug. 19, 2017. (Michael Hamtil/Staff Photographer)

First, I would like to state emphatically that no sculpture, private or public, should be vandalized, defaced or used to justify violence in a civilized society. If there are any issues with a specific piece of public art, the democratic process should always be used and respected within that community.

I live and work in St. Louis, Mo., now and teach sculpture at Fontbonne University here. This subject has come up more than once among my students and, of course, concerns me directly because of my profession as a sculptor of public art, and also as an African-American. Let me say that it is not uncommon for sculptures to be moved. That occurs on a regular basis for many different reasons in the United States and many other Western nations.

If you visit Russia or Eastern Europe, the hundreds, if not thousands, of public monuments of Lenin and Stalin have been taken down. In Germany, all of their prominent generals and public figures from the World War II era have been removed.

These sculptures have not been removed because they are not an important part of these countries' histories, or world history, but because they no longer represent the values of these countries. It is also very important to these countries for the outside world to know that their political and civic values have changed for the better.

These countries still honor their war dead and hold them in very high esteem. However, the political leadership and structure that caused these wars, social upheavals, and the horrific human suffering that came with them is no longer praised or promoted.

When I compete for any of my commissions, there is a great deal of community involvement. There are usually three committees of citizens and elected officials involved in choosing the winning design. I have to attend many public meetings to listen to the community's concerns before I start my design process. After I have created a design, I then have to make many presentations to the community at large and in front of elected officials at meetings open to the public. All stakeholders are consulted.

Artist David Newton, show here in 2001, created sculptures representing slaves for the Freedman's Cemetery memorial in Dallas (Judy Walgren/KERA /The Dallas Morning News Archives)

My small models, from which the finals will be created, may be on public display along with that of my competitors for months in order to get public feedback before a decision is made and an artist chosen. This is done because taxpayer money and land are involved.

I say this to make the point that when the Lee sculpture went up in 1936, African-Americans still had to pay a poll tax to vote, among many other voting obstacles. They had no voice at the time of the park's naming, or decisions on the placement of the sculpture.

During that era, Dallas was under strict Jim Crow laws, and African-Americans had no political power, influence or voice. Even as late as 1910, an African-American man was lynched and left to hang in downtown Dallas. Photographs of the lynching were sold as tourist postcards and mementos celebrating the event.

I believe that each community is different, with its own particular standards. These standards are not fixed and change as demographics, political power and influence change. For example, it would not be appropriate for a sculpture of Jefferson Davis to remain at a high school whose neighborhood demographics have changed from majority Caucasian to majority African-American.

The sculpture should not be harmed, but a vigorous -- and civil -- public debate should be had. My stand on this issue is that every community has to debate and decide what their standards should be. It should not be dictated from outside that community.

This may not be a satisfying answer in a divided country that is now in the grips of a culture war, but it means that some monuments will stay and some will be moved to a more appropriate space -- not hidden -- but in a historical context.

Sadly, no matter the decision, there will inevitably be hard feelings on both sides. But at the end of the day, using our democratic methods is the only way I can see resolving this issue in these heated political times.

So long as the sculpture is kept safe, it can be moved back if times change again.

***Editor's note**: David Newton is a professor of sculpture at Fontbonne University in St. Louis. Newton sculpted the Freedman's Cemetery memorial in Dallas, achieved in two phases in 2000 and 2011. There are additional works of bronze memorial sculpture in Plano, Fort Worth and at Dallas Love Field as well as historically accurate re-creations of lost or badly damaged sculpture at Fair Park, particularly the monumental figures representing Contralto and Countertenor on Texas Centennial Mall.*