

January 20, 2002

Ideas & Trends; Casting Civic Pride In a Utopian Mold

By TRACIE ROZHON

IN the stakes to erect the first major monument to the rescuers and victims of Sept. 11, a developer proposed a large bronze statue, based on a photograph of three white firemen raising the American flag over the smoldering ruins. But the sculptor wanted to make one change: the three would become a multiethnic group -- one white, one Hispanic and one black.

That announcement unleashed a public outcry; to those who opposed the alteration it was the latest insult in the growing list of insults that started with the attack itself. But the debate over civic sculpture -- what it should depict, how it should be depicted -- is not new.

They may have been arguing over it in Pompeii, when statues honored rulers, philosophers, or groups of warriors, said Albert Boime, a professor of art history at the University of California at Los Angeles. The late 19th and early 20th centuries in America, marked by great wealth and great patriotism, was rife with debates over civic sculpture. In 1891, a woman left a modest legacy to New York City to build a drinking fountain; what emerged more than three decades later was a large work by Frederick William MacMonnies, depicting a young, virtually nude male with a sword, trampling on two female figures, who represent urban vice. Titled "Civic Virtue," the statue was unveiled just as women got the vote. The new voters were, not surprisingly, outraged. But "Civic Virtue" stayed in City Hall Park until Robert Moses exiled it to Queens.

Another civic brouhaha erupted over a memorial to the men who died on the battleship Maine, which mysteriously blew up in Havana harbor and sparked the Spanish-American War. It was proposed for Times Square by William Randolph Hearst, the newspaper publisher many blamed for starting the war in the first place. Opposed by The New York Times -- Hearst's competitor -- action on the monument was deferred by the city, which installed a public toilet instead. But Hearst did not give up: the statue was dedicated in 1913 -- at the Columbus Circle entrance to Central Park.

Sculptures have provoked outrage in the recent past as well. In 1992, a white sculptor, asked to create something relevant for the 44th Precinct headquarters in the South Bronx, made a series of bronzes -- a man and his pit bull, a teenager on roller skates and a man with his foot on his boom box, all presumably black. The statues lasted five days before the public outcry grew so intense that the artist trucked his works away. They are in a museum in Long Island City.

It might be said that sculptors, and artists in general, always take liberties. The debate over the Statue of Liberty rages on: was it the artist's mother, his mistress -- or a combination of both? In the famous Iwo Jima statue, in which men are also raising a flag, also taken from a famous photograph, there were questions, too: the sculptor rotated the men's faces, so they could be seen. Some objected. And people forget that the now heralded Vietnam Memorial, by Maya Lin, was so controversial that a representational statue was installed nearby. That sculpture shows a white lieutenant leading his men: a Latino and an African-American.

So there is certainly a precedent for doing "a melting pot sculpture," said Karal Ann Marling, the author of "Iwo Jima: Monument, Memories and the American Hero." Ms. Marling, an art historian, reported that bisque figurines, based on the World Trade Center photograph by Thomas E. Franklin, have already appeared in the Midwest -- with white firefighters. Yet Ms. Marling disagreed with the critics of the proposed monument who find the whole idea kitsch. "It's the truth: three guys did raise the flag -- would they rather have some abstraction, like the one they just petitioned to tear down -- a "Tilted Arc"? What does that say: 'I'm just a big piece of metal junk?' What does a statue of firemen, based on an event that really happened -- what does that say?" To her, the alteration of photographs to include other ethnic groups depends on the quality of the sculptor and the quality of the work.

But Ann Douglas, a professor of American Studies at Columbia University, doesn't know of any civic sculpture that changed the race of the subject. "Certainly, the Greek sculptors took some liberties with their subjects: they idealized them, made them more heroic." But the current political correctness is a bit much for her. "Can you see someone insisting that a statue of Bunker Hill battle have a woman?" she said. Ms. Douglas's book, "Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920's," details the role of African-Americans in shaping the city's culture. But to her, adding a black and a Latino is "falsifying history, even though I wish there had been a Puerto Rican and an African-American and a white fireman, there wasn't -- at that particular moment."

Ric Burns, who directed the PBS documentary series, "New York," said this fierce debate is partly timing. "We're too close to it," he

said. He pointed out that the Vietnam Memorial was not built until seven years after the war. "It's almost impossible to get the symbolic gesture right." He said a degree of abstraction may be needed. "The Statue of Liberty -- what could be more Gallic -- is still, to a degree, abstract." There may come a time, he said, when the public will demand an abstract motif.

But now, the debaters are taking a break. Thursday, fire officials and the developer tabled plans for the multiethnic statue.

At this point, Mr. Burns said the public hungers for specifics, thus, the popularity of the tiny, detailed obituaries. A statue commemorating the heroism of three specific men, doing one specific thing, may have been all right -- if they had reproduced the photo. "To detach this expression of specificity, by changing the identifications of three white firemen, is to move away from what makes it powerful," said Mr. Burns. "It violates the proper memory."

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