

Written in stone: Monumental changes and conceptual dismantling



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

It is written ... Moses hiked up a desert mountain, heard a voice in a flaming fir, and was dazzled by the presentation of an original lithograph with a long list of religious duties etched in granite (I'm taking artistic license with this, as the writer of Exodus may have done). As the story goes, Moses hiked down to find another artist had been busy. Moses was so upset by the Israelites dancing around the new artwork made by his brother Aaron, an original piece called The Golden Cow, he threw down the Lord's Lithograph, shattering the sacred sentences into divine dust. Moses the Mountaineer became Moses the Artist. He made his own stone tablets, went back up, received a second edition lithograph, and the rest is ... biblical history.

I've often wondered: Where are those stone tablets? You would think that the Lord's Lithograph, even pieces of it, would have been preserved by someone. What happened to the other monument, the Golden Cow? Moses had it burned to powder, added water and made the people drink it! (we get a taste in the Book of Exodus).

Monuments matter. Sculptures are significant. Lithographs are lovely ... un-

less they're not. Meaning is molded, shaped, chiseled and carved into our community memory. Which presents a cautionary warning: Watch what you make and the message it sends. Art can be dangerous, especially if it sends a false or flawed message.

The Monument Lab, in partnership with the Andrew Mellon Foundation, has been actively studying American monuments. Their National Monument Audit "assesses the current monument landscape across the United States." The extensive analysis "allows us to better understand the dynamics and trends that have shaped our monument landscape, to pose questions about common knowledge about monuments, and to debunk falsehoods and misperceptions within public memory" (see www.monumentlab.com). Their research reveals some troubling facts.

Of the 50,000 monuments studied, religious themes and figures are featured in about 5,800 – more than the arts, nature or mythology. But even religion can't measure up to the 30,000 monuments dedicated to commemorating war, warfare and weapons. That may be worth some national self-reflection. As the Monument Lab frames this: "Violence is the most dominant subject." Yet, of the almost 6,000 Civil War monuments, only one percent of them mention slavery. More self-reflection is called for.

Regarding the top 50 historical figures commemorated, Abraham Lincoln

has almost 200 monuments, while George Washington has nearly 175. Confederate leaders get over 120. Martin Luther King Jr. has 86, while Robert E. Lee has 59. There are only five people of color in the top 50. Half of the top 50 owned slaves. And, to no one's surprise, monuments across the land are "overwhelmingly white and male."

Another conclusion of the monument audit: "The story of the United States as told by our current monuments misrepresents our history." While we're thinking about that, let's consider what our monuments to faith represent and ask whether they too misrepresent anything.

If you think about it, the history of religion is littered with lithographic likenesses – the saints and saviors of humankind. I've stood in front of monuments to various teachers including Buddha and Ganesha, Krishna and Christ, and each time I sensed an invitation to stop, contemplate and honor the ancient stories. I've paused at monuments to discovery and destruction, heroes and heretics. Each image reminds me of a complex story, and invariably I find I don't know the whole story. A monument is an artistic encouragement to learn more, to balance my perspective, to pick up another piece of this perplexing puzzle we call history.

By their definition, Monument Lab sees a monument as "a statement of power and presence in public." That powerful presence is serious: "While

monuments are not history, they can and should be held accountable to history. Monuments that perpetuate harmful myths ... require honest reckoning, conceptual dismantling, and active repair." Context matters.

"Conceptual dismantling" may be uncomfortable, but when it comes to monumental religion, there may be nothing more important. We may need to come down off the mountain, out of the clouds, and look closely at what we have etched in stone.

"Monuments do more than just help us remember – they make our society's values visible ... History does not live in statues. History lives between people." How many religious monuments emphasize that human dimension?

"If we seek a nation [belief, tradition] that lives up to its creed ... and connects to its history in ways that are more truthful, complex, and vital, then our monuments must change."

What we set in stone (or scripture) shapes us, sculpting our worldview, forming our understanding of our world, our history, how we relate to others who share our common history.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His latest books are "Friendly Freethinker," "Broken Bridges" and "A Freethinker's Gospel." Learn more at chighland.com.