



MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SCULPTURE

London, United Kingdom

51.55194, -0.08494



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Executive Summary

A sculpture of Mary Wollstonecraft, named *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*, stands on Newington Green in London. It sparked controversy following its unveiling on November 10, 2020, as some argued that the depiction of the nude 'everywoman' failed to commemorate the proto-feminist philosophies of Wollstonecraft in a respectful manner. A lack of public vote also prompted criticism. Campaigns have now begun to commission an alternative statue, although at present a sculpture of Mary Wollstonecraft remains the only tangible representation of her legacy.

Introduction

A ten-year campaign to memorialise proto-feminist Enlightenment figure Mary Wollstonecraft resulted in controversy when the design deviated significantly from public expectation. Planning and fundraising for the project was volunteer-led, rallying both public and parliamentary support. Selected by a judging panel, British artist Maggi Hambling CBE's artwork – entitled *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* – was unveiled on November 10, 2020, on Newington Green, London. Its abstract design and use of nudity attracted immediate criticism. Discourse regarding the appropriate representation of feminism in public art is ongoing.

Background

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was a prominent writer, pedagogue and women's rights activist in eighteenth-century Britain. Born in Spitalfields, her literary output spanned novels, travelogues, philosophical treatises and a first-hand account of the French Revolution. Her posthumously-published memoir, containing then-scandalous details of her romantic affairs, resulted in a widespread and prolonged repudiation of her work.¹

Wollstonecraft's intellectual legacy was revived through twentieth-century scholarship; she is now recognised as a forerunner of feminist philosophy and regularly included in the canon of British intellectual history. She is chiefly celebrated for the pioneering text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which portrayed women as men's equals in intellect and rationality, asserting their right to comprehensive education.² Her other works include *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790).³

Over the last 20 years, in London, Wollstonecraft has been honoured with plaques on Mare Street, Werrington Street and Dolben Street, as well as at Newington Green Primary School in 2011, on the site of a former school for girls she co-founded in 1784.⁴ Additionally, as a mark of respect and recognition of her role as a 'champion of gender equality', she also had an asteroid named in her memory in 2004.⁵

Mary on the Green campaign

Since 2010, the "Mary on the Green" (MOTG) campaign, chaired by writer Bee Rowlatt, has been advocating for a memorial, commemorating Wollstonecraft's achievements, to stand on Newington

¹ Sandrine Bergès and Alan Coffee, eds., *The Social and Political Philosophy of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Janet Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000); Eleanor Flexner, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Biography* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1972); Lyndall Gordon, *Vindication: A Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Virago, 2005).

² Mary Wollstonecraft, "A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*" (London: J. Johnson, 1792).

³ Mary Wollstonecraft, "Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, with Reflections on Female Conduct in the More Important Duties of Life" (London: J. Johnson, 1787); Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: J. Johnson, 1790).

⁴ Open Plaques "Mary Wollstonecraft," *Open Plaques*, 2020.

⁵ NASA, "90481 Wollstonecraft (2004 DA)," *Solar System Dynamics: JPL Small-Body Database Browser*, 2005.

Green. The campaign describes her as ‘one of the key thinkers on Enlightenment’, focusing on equality and educational reform.⁶ They argue the need for a tangible representation of her ideas in a city where over 90% of statues honour men.⁷

With a donation target of £143,300, major fundraising efforts began in 2011, kick-started by a publicity event where Wollstonecraft’s image was projected onto the Houses of Parliament, assisted by long-time supporter Jeremy Corbyn MP.⁸ The campaign involved a variety of initiatives, including media and festival appearances, leafleting, street art, merchandise and speaker events. Among other things, organisers created the Twitter campaign #MinuteForMary, circulated a promotional film and held a running tour of London on International Women’s Day in 2016.⁹ They garnered significant support from MPs and public figures, petitioning the press and London mayor Sadiq Khan.¹⁰

In March 2018, the campaign announced a shortlist of two designs, one by Maggi Hambling and another by Martin Jennings. Two months later, Hambling’s design was unanimously selected. Although there had been a consultation survey, asking local inhabitants to voice their preferences, ultimately the decision fell to a seven-person judging panel of professional curators, artists and MOTG representatives.¹¹

Hambling’s sculpture was unveiled on November 10, 2020, on Newington Green, close to the site of Wollstonecraft’s former girls school and the nearby unitarian church she attended. Due to social distancing restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the unveiling was livestreamed on Twitter and Facebook.¹²

Made from silvered bronze and standing 10 feet tall, the sculpture depicts abstract female forms merging into an organic mass that culminates in a small nude figurine, intended to symbolise ‘everywoman’.¹³ Displayed at the base are Wollstonecraft’s name and her quote, ‘I do not wish women to have power over men but over themselves’.¹⁴

⁶ The Enlightenment period took place between the 17 and 18th centuries. This was a philosophical turning point, where opinions became less influenced by religious sensibilities and more governed by science. In the feminist context, Enlightenment theorists focused on unpacking the concept of gender and highlighting the abilities of women to be both intellectually capable and morally self-governing.

⁷ “About the campaign,” Mary on the Green, 2020.

⁸ Jane Martinson, “Mary Wollstonecraft’s image is beamed onto Palace of Westminster,” *The Guardian*, November 17, 2011.

⁹ Jenni Murray, “Mary Wollstonecraft Statue,” *Women’s Hour*, March 10, 2011, on BBC Radio 4; Kieron Townend and Bee Rowlett, “Wollstonecraft the Movie,” March 2015, 1:42; “Run for Mary,” Mary on the Green, 2020.

¹⁰ Jeremy Corbyn et al., “Mary Wollstonecraft must finally have her statue,” *Guardian*, March 7, 2018; Susan Cahill, “A statue for feminist icon Mary Wollstonecraft #whereswolly #VindicationforMary,” change.org, March 8, 2018.

¹¹ Hackney Citizen, “Campaigners announce winning design for Mary Wollstonecraft statue,” *Hackney Citizen*, May 15, 2018.

¹² Mary on the Green, “Mary on the Green Premiere,” November 10, 2020.

¹³ Robert Dex, “Artist Maggi Hambling says critics of Mary Wollstonecraft sculpture ‘missed the point,’” *Evening Standard*, November 11, 2020.

¹⁴ Bee Rowlett, “The original suffragette: the extraordinary Mary Wollstonecraft,” *Guardian*, October 5, 2015.

History of the Contestation

The sculpture's design was met with immediate criticism.¹⁵ Within hours of the unveiling, images of the artwork went viral worldwide and fierce discourse ensued across news broadcasting outlets, academia, print and social media. The MOTG hashtags #MaryWollstonecraft and #VindicationForMary trended for several days on Twitter with overwhelmingly negative commentary.

Public Opinion

Common complaints were that the design was sexist, disrespectful, and that it ultimately failed to represent Wollstonecraft's individuality or intellectualism. Both the nudity and the decision to depict an 'everywoman' instead of Wollstonecraft herself were heavily criticised. The author and activist Caroline Criado Perez OBE, who campaigned successfully for Jane Austen on the £10 note and a statue of suffragist Millicent Fawcett, wrote:

I honestly feel that actually this representation is insulting to her. I can't see her feeling happy to be represented by this naked, perfectly formed wet dream of a woman. We've celebrated so few women from the past that the temptation is to attempt [to represent] all of womanhood, which is never an issue when it's a male statue.¹⁶

That the figurine depicted a young, thin, stereotypically attractive body was particularly condemned. Novelist Imogen Hermes Gowar tweeted: 'Nameless, nude and conventionally attractive is the only way women have ever been acceptable in public sculpture'.¹⁷ Other critics felt the nudity was inconsistent with Wollstonecraft's message that women should be valued for their minds, not reduced to their bodies. Historian Dr Myriam Wilks-Heeg summarises this viewpoint, writing:

I bristle at having her achievement reduced to corporeality. Feminists have long challenged the idea of sexed difference, that is, that a woman's biology or physicality naturally prevents her from developing and expressing rational thought. Given that Wollstonecraft was particularly vocal about this very issue, opposition to the sculpture is hardly surprising.¹⁸

Comments from the general public on social media and journalism platforms reveal disappointment

¹⁵ Claire Selvin, "Mary Wollstonecraft Monument in London Generates Controversy," *ARTnews*, November 10, 2020; Valentina Di Liscia, "The World Got its First Memorial to Feminist Giant Mary Wollstonecraft...and it's a Tiny Female Nude," *Hyperallergic*, November 10, 2020; Isobel Frodsham, "Mary Wollstonecraft honoured with statue 200 years after her death," *Independent*, November 10, 2020; Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, "Why I hate the Mary Wollstonecraft statue: would a man be 'honoured' with his schlong out?" *Guardian*, November 10, 2020.

¹⁶ Alexandra Topping, "'Insulting to her': Mary Wollstonecraft sculpture sparks backlash," *The Guardian*, November 10, 2020.

¹⁷ Imogen Hermes Gowar, Twitter Post, November 10, 2020.

¹⁸ Myriam Wilks-Heeg, "Mary Mary, quite contrary: a statue for Wollstonecraft," *University of Liverpool Department of History Blog*, November 18, 2020.

at receiving an abstract artwork rather than a memorial specifically to Wollstonecraft, as implied by the MOTG campaign's use of the term 'statue' and promise to 'put Mary on the Green'.¹⁹ Many questioned how far the sculpture fulfills the stated aim of tangibly honouring Wollstonecraft's legacy and redressing the gender imbalance of London statues.

Madeleina Kay writes in an issue of the zine *Feminist Visions*, entitled 'Re-designing the Mary Wollstonecraft Statue', that although the debates around the statue have encouraged people to talk about Mary Wollstonecraft, 'The problem with this design was that it was created by a man, and so the design submitted by a female artist was chosen in preference. This could be seen as an example of positive discrimination, but if so, it is short-sighted and based on the false assumptions that there is no such thing as a male feminist and that women can't reinforce the patriarchy'.²⁰

Hambling's response that 'as far as [she] knew, [the figure was] more or less the shape we'd all like to be' was seen as confirmation that the sculpture perpetuates a restrictive male gaze.²¹ As of December 2020, protestors still regularly adorn the naked figurine with clothes.²²

A few days after the unveiling, a crowdfunding campaign was launched to fund Jennings' alternative sculpture.²³ Jennings has stated 'Women have been represented as ideas in public sculpture for generations and I think people are fed up with that'.²⁴ His more traditional design depicts a fully-clothed, quill-wielding Wollstonecraft poised in a scholarly pose. The crowdfunder, launched just 10 days after the unveiling of Hambling's statue, raised the required £8,530 to create Jennings' statue by 7th January 2021. The campaign claims that they are in the process of reaching out to councils in places that were important to Wollstonecraft, to find the right location for this second statue.²⁵ Jennings claims that he would like the statue to be somewhere between Spitalfields, Hackney and Camden.²⁶

Response from Hambling and Mary on the Green campaign

Throughout the controversy, Hambling and MOTG have defended the design, reminding critics that it is a sculpture for Wollstonecraft, not a likeness of her. Inspired by Wollstonecraft's desire to be 'the first of a new genus', it symbolises the birth of feminism as a movement, with each individual woman, warrior-like and determined, propped up by past generations of womankind.²⁷ Hambling insists that clothing would have restricted the sculpture to a particular historical time period, when it

¹⁹ "Mary on the Green," *Mary on the Green*, 2020.

²⁰ Angelika Strohmayer and Rosanna Bellini, eds., "Re-Designing the Mary Wollstonecraft Statue," *Feminist Visions*, 2021, 9-10.

²¹ Emily Alford, "New 'Everywoman' Statue Goes Bush-Out for Feminism, Just Like Mary Wollstonecraft Would Have Wanted," *Jezebel*, November 10, 2020.

²² Emma Batha, "Fans fund new statue of British feminist after 'silver Barbie' row," *Reuters*, November 16, 2020.

²³ Sarah-Louise Jordan, "The First Statue of Mary Wollstonecraft," *crowdfunder.co.uk*, November 12, 2020.

²⁴ Emma Batha, "Fans fund new statue of British feminist after 'silver Barbie' row," *Reuters*, November 16, 2020.

²⁵ Sarah-Louise Jordan, "The First Statue of Mary Wollstonecraft," *crowdfunder.co.uk*, November 12, 2020.

²⁶ Sally Patterson, "Crowdfunder for new Mary Wollstonecraft statue launched after controversy surrounds Newington Green piece," *Hackney Gazette*, November 18, 2020.

²⁷ Eleanor Nairne, "A Naked Statue for a Feminist Hero?" *New York Times*, November 12, 2020.

is instead intended to represent the ongoing struggle for female emancipation.²⁸

Since the design's selection in 2018, MOTG campaigners have consistently praised its capacity to spark debate, including claiming the viral attention it has received as a victory.²⁹ They have also portrayed the radicalism of the design as something in keeping with Wollstonecraft's own unorthodox ideas. The writer Rowlatt claims that the piece was supposed to be 'challenging' and that the campaigners 'were excited by the idea of getting away from putting people on pedestals, which frankly is not in the spirit of Wollstonecraft's philosophy'.³⁰ She argues that the design is deliberately provocative and collectivist, a feminist challenge to the masculine Victorian tradition of bronze busts glorifying individuals, which Rowlatt describes as 'passé'.³¹ A statement released by MOTG reads:

As opposed to traditional male heroic statuary, the free-standing woman has evolved organically from, is supported by, and does not forget, all her predecessors who advocated, campaigned and sacrificed themselves for women's emancipation.³²

Ongoing contestations in discourse

As of December 2020, advocates and critics of the sculpture have reached a stalemate on three key debates:

1. The significance of female nudity

Hambling's critics argue that female nakedness has the unavoidable conceptual baggage of objectification and dehumanisation; idealised female nudity has long been used in art history to emphasise the frivolity and inferiority of women. Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, a Guardian journalist, accuses Hambling of:

a lack of creativity, a consequent falling back on the visual symbols that we are told epitomise great art (perky breasts) with the false belief that fidelity to those conventions will prevent anyone from pointing out their banality.³³

By contrast, Hambling asserts that nudity is an empowering representation of authenticity and the rawness of liberated womanhood, a sentiment shared by some viewers.³⁴

²⁸ Robert Dex, "Artist Maggi Hambling says critics of Mary Wollstonecraft sculpture 'missed the point,'" *Evening Standard*, November 11, 2020; Hackney Citizen, "Campaign for Mary Wollstonecraft public memorial on Newington Green gains momentum," *Hackney Citizen*, March 13, 2018.

²⁹ Nicola Slawson, "Maggi Hambling picked to create Mary Wollstonecraft statue," *Guardian*, May 16, 2018; Mark Brown, "Mary Wollstonecraft finally honoured with statue after 200 years," *Guardian*, November 10, 2020.

³⁰ Alexandra Topping, "'Insulting to her': Mary Wollstonecraft sculpture sparks backlash," *Guardian*, November 10, 2020; Vanessa Thorpe, "'I need complete freedom': Maggi Hambling responds to statue critics," *Guardian*, November 14, 2020.

³¹ Daniel Ofman, "It's a sculpture of an idea: activist defends nude statue honoring Mary Wollstonecraft amid backlash," *PRI: The World*, November 12, 2020.

³² "The world's first memorial sculpture to Mary Wollstonecraft, the foremother of feminism, is finally here," *Mary on the Green*, 2020.

³³ Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, 'Why I hate the Mary Wollstonecraft statue: would a man be 'honoured' with his schlong out?' *Guardian*, November 10, 2020.

³⁴ Eleanor Nairne, "A Naked Statue for a Feminist Hero?" *New York Times*, November 12, 2020.

2. The societal function of public art

Disagreement also stems from the parties' disparate views on the function of public art. For Hambling and her supporters, public art is the creative expression of personal inspiration. It should challenge viewers, prompt debate and encourage subjective interpretations, but ultimately must prioritise the artist and their vision. Hambling has consistently defended her right to total artistic freedom.³⁵

For Hambling's critics, public art has a greater degree of objectivity: it should act as an easily-understandable representation of the commemorated subject, thus facilitating a broader societal memory culture. From this perspective, monuments can be abstract and radical, but must ultimately represent the specific legacy or spirit of the honoured person, not just the artist.³⁶

3. The compatibility of feminism with traditional forms of memorialisation

This case opens up several questions about evolving norms of memorialisation and the future of statues as the default form of memory culture. The MOTG campaign deliberately opted for a design which challenged traditional, individualistic norms of representation. The sculpture commemorates an individual by depicting solidarity and community; it commemorates a historical legacy in a presentist and forward-thinking way.

Hambling's critics contend that erasing Wollstonecraft's individuality is counter-productive and obscures her specific achievements. Her work deserves specific, personal recognition, rather than a symbolic and more general recognition of womankind. This conflict reflects a common tension in feminist discourse between the desire to radically transform hegemony and the desire to pragmatically conform to some normative practices to avoid undermining the movement's legitimacy.

Decision-Making Processes

The planning and installation of the Wollstonecraft sculpture was a volunteer-led, grassroots effort coordinated by MOTG. Although some supporters were high-profile members of private industry and the public sector, including Dame Fiona Woolf and Jeremy Corbyn MP, the process was ultimately private and did not involve civil officials or elected government representatives. MOTG used a non-binding survey to canvas public opinion on the design and relied on donations from private individuals, as well as some larger contributions from charities and celebrities.

In April 2018, the committee invited the two candidates, Hambling and Jennings, to make models or maquettes of their proposed statues and show the community. They received 747 responses from the public, one third of which came from those living close to the green, reflecting high levels of local engagement and participation in the process.³⁷ The public

³⁵ Vanessa Thorpe, "I need complete freedom": Maggi Hambling responds to statue critics," *Guardian*, November 14, 2020.

³⁶ Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett, 'Why I hate the Mary Wollstonecraft statue: would a man be 'honoured' with his schlong out?' *Guardian*, November 10, 2020.

³⁷ Vanessa Thorpe, "I need complete freedom": Maggi Hambling responds to statue critics," *The Guardian*, November 14, 2020.

consultation was supposed to inform the decision which would be made between May and June 2018.³⁸ Yet the public consultation, in fact, did not involve a vote, as many had assumed it would. The decision was instead made by a judging panel of professional curators and members of the public.³⁹ Anna Birch, a spokeswoman for the MOTG campaign, said that Hambling had been chosen after a lengthy consultation and rigorous judging process. She claimed that a range of factors contributed to the decision: (a) Hambling's international reputation matched the revolutionary contributions that Wollstonecraft had made to the history of humankind; (b) Hambling is personally passionate about Wollstonecraft's legacy; and (c) the intention was for an artistic interpretation and 'something metaphorical', rather than something literal that could be seen in Parliament Square by a craftsman: the sculpture was intended to celebrate Wollstonecraft's 'spirit'.⁴⁰

Members of the public and grassroots organisations have attempted to assert decision-making power via both acts of vandalism – orange graffiti was sprayed on the statue in January 2021, sparking debates amongst local residents⁴¹– and by canvassing for a new version of the statue to rival Hambling's, in an alternative location, that would fulfil what members of the public had hoped to see in a public memorial. Since the statue went up, the 'everywoman' figure has been regularly covered by people in various items of clothing, including capes and face masks.⁴² Rather than calling for the statue to be removed or forcibly taken down, critics of Hambling's statue are instead advocating for a multiplicity of public representations of Wollstonecraft, that might serve different purposes: one artistic (tending to the metaphorical 'spirit' of Wollstonecraft) and another representational (literal, of, rather than for, Wollstonecraft).

The length and publicly-funded nature of the campaign contributed to a sense of investment, with the public essentially becoming stakeholders in the project. This resulted in widespread frustration when the design deviated from expectation. The contestation is ongoing, and no solution has been found between the two positions.

Dynamics to consider in decision-making include: the rights of donors in publicly-funded projects; tensions between literal and metaphorical monuments; the distinction between artwork, monument and statue, especially the need to qualify the prerogative of the artist; social media as a site for contestation and dissent; alternatives to individualistic memory culture; the inadequacy of traditional forms of remembrance to accommodate social justice initiatives.

Summary and Conclusions

A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft was the result of a decade-long grassroots campaign to honour a feminist icon of the British Enlightenment. Its abstract design attracted immediate and

³⁸ Samantha Booth. "Revealed: How the statue of Mary Wollstonecraft on Newington Green could look," *Islington Tribune*, March 9, 2018.

³⁹ Helen Barrett, "Mary Wollstonecraft row shows how confused we are about public art," *Financial Times*, November 13, 2020.

⁴⁰ Nicola Slawson, "Maggi Hambling picked to create Mary Wollstonecraft statue," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2018.

⁴¹ April Curtin, "'Shameful' vandalism of new naked Mary Wollstonecraft statue fuels even more debate among residents," *MyLondon*, January 11, 2021.

⁴² Mark Brown, "Mary Wollstonecraft statue becomes one of 2020's most polarising artworks," *The Guardian*, December 25, 2020.

intense backlash, particularly on social media, with many commentators claiming it was an ill-fitting tribute to Wollstonecraft's uniqueness as a thinker, writer and campaigner. This was exacerbated by widespread misunderstanding that the piece depicted Wollstonecraft herself. The installation sparked disagreements about nudity, the function of public art and the appropriate memorialisation of feminism, all of which remain unresolved. Crowdfunding has begun for an alternative Wollstonecraft monument. Evidencing that discourse regarding the appropriate representation of feminism in public art remains ongoing.

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Last updated April, 2022

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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Published by IHJR-EuroClio in February 2021
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To cite this publication:
The Contested Histories Initiative, "Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft in London, England",
Contested Histories Case Study #225 (April 2022), retrieved from [link].

The Contested Histories Initiative receives support from the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.