



# EQUESTRIAN STATUE OF THEODORE ROOSEVELT

## New York City, United States

40.78084, -73.97282

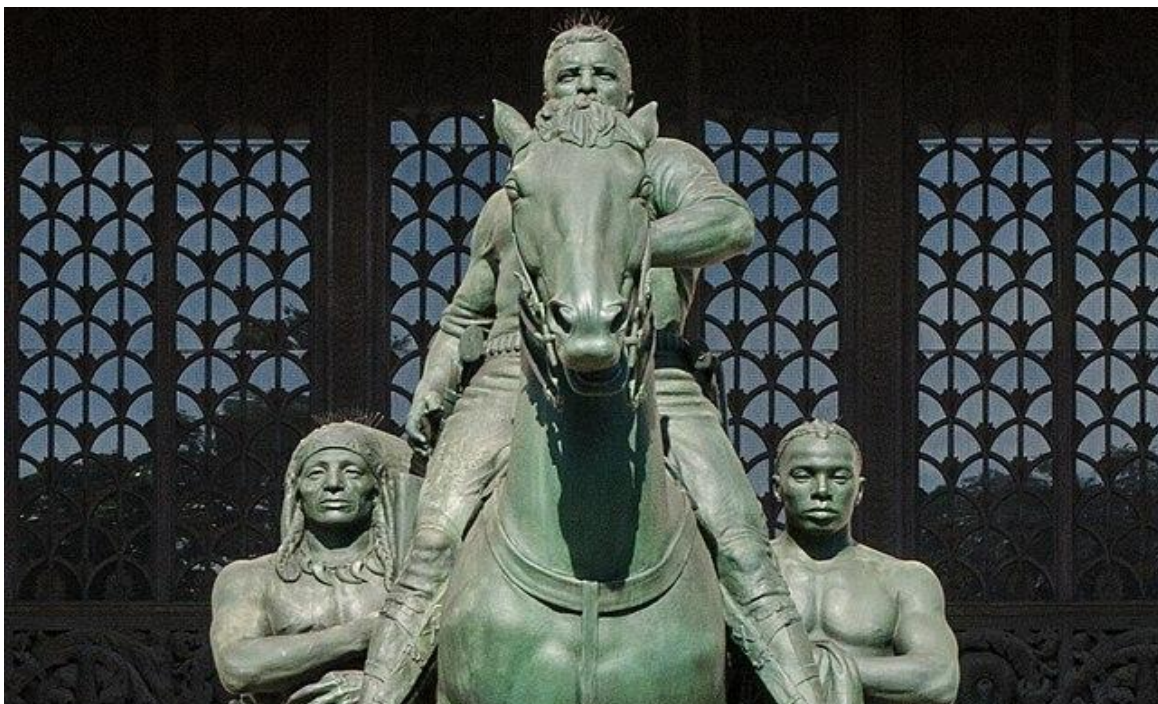


Image by edwardhblake via Wikimedia Commons CC BY CC 2.0

### Executive Summary

On 21 June 2021 plans were confirmed for the removal of the statue of Theodore Roosevelt, which had been standing outside the American Museum of Natural History since 1939. The eventual decision to remove the statue came after years of debate, protests and multiple instances of vandalism. The decision also came after the Museum's own attempt to contextualise and discuss the statue in an interactive exhibition. This case study looks at the response of the Museum and the City of New York to the controversy, and the challenges faced in making a decision about a high profile monument, especially within the current American political context.

## Introduction

Erected in 1939 as part of a larger Theodore Roosevelt Memorial, the *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt* has polarised public opinion over its 'hierarchical composition' of a standing Native American and African figure flanking Roosevelt on horseback.<sup>1</sup> Situated in front of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York City the statue was intended as a tribute to Roosevelt for his contribution to conservation during and beyond his presidency of the United States.

Spurred by the nationwide reassessment of controversial statues after the 11 August 2017 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, the New York Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art was established in January 2018 to review statues on city property. The *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt* seemed an appropriate choice for review, as it had been protested for nearly fifty years owing to its hierarchical composition, and Roosevelt's association with eugenics and American imperialism. The Commission came to a split-decision on the fate of the *Equestrian Statue*, deciding to provide 'additional interpretation and context' to the monument.<sup>2</sup> The Museum subsequently opened a special exhibition entitled 'Addressing the Statue' in 2019, in an attempt to reconcile its controversial physical appearance with Roosevelt's positive legacy for conservation and his personal contributions to the Museum. On June 21 2020, after the killing of George Floyd<sup>3</sup> in Minneapolis and nationwide protests against racism, the Museum decided to remove the statue from the front of the Museum and will be relocated to an institution devoted to Roosevelt's life and legacy, his memorial library in North Dakota.

This case study illustrates that the legacy of an individual being honoured is not synonymous with the way the physical composition of a statue is understood in the present. It also explores an example of contextualisation as a method for reconciliation and the importance of creating a sustained dialogue regarding alternative interpretations of controversial monuments.

## Background

The statue commemorates the Nobel Peace prize-winning former President of the United States Theodore Roosevelt. In 1920, a year after Theodore Roosevelt died, the New York State Legislature formed a Memorial Association, and the *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt* was commissioned in 1925 to stand on the steps of the American Museum of Natural History, on city-owned property.<sup>4</sup> The Board of Trustees of the New York State Roosevelt Memorial wrote in 1928 that the memorial was intended to express Roosevelt's life as a 'nature lover, naturalist,

---

<sup>1</sup> AMNH, "Addressing the Statue - 6/10/20 statement from the Museum," *AMNH.org*.

<sup>2</sup> "Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers: A Report to the City of New York," *New York: Mayoral Advisory Commission*, January 25, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota sparked worldwide protests against racism and police brutality. As a result, controversial statues and monuments became a subject of intense scrutiny, with many monument removals and name changes occurring throughout the world.

<sup>4</sup> AMNH, "Addressing the Statue - 6/10/20 statement from the Museum," *AMNH.org*.

explorer and author of works of natural history.<sup>15</sup> During his life, Roosevelt established 150 national forests, conserving over 230 million acres of public land - a legacy which documentary filmmaker Ken Burns dubbed 'America's best idea.'<sup>16</sup>

Roosevelt remains a hero to many Americans. He is admired by many liberals, due to his actions to tackle large corporations, earning him the reputation as a 'trust buster.' His work in conservation also gained him many admirers. For many who feel moved by the natural world, America's magnificent National Parks are one of its greatest achievements. It should be noted, however, that the conservation movement itself is controversial. The setting aside of land often perceived as 'wilderness' for early conservation areas often came at the expense of Native Americans, who inhabited the 'wilderness' and were subsequently left dispossessed.<sup>7</sup>

The statue in question, known officially as the 'Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt,' is the focal point of the larger Theodore Roosevelt Memorial which forms the entrance to the Museum.<sup>8</sup> The park encompassing it was referred to as Manhattan Park until the name was changed to Theodore Roosevelt Park in 1958.<sup>9</sup> The work is by James Earle Fraser, who was the chief assistant to the famous sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens for many years. Fraser was a successful sculptor in his own right and at the time of the sculpture's commission he was a popular artist, though he is not well remembered today.<sup>10</sup> The sculpture was not designed in isolation and forms part of a much larger overall design for the Museum front by the architect John Russell Pope.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 1:** "Theodore Roosevelt outside the American Museum of Natural History", Image by Matt Dwen via Flickr BY-NC-ND 2.0

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> W.E. Leuchtenburg, "The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton," *New York, Oxford University Press*, 35, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>8</sup> AMNH, "Addressing the Statue - 6/10/20 statement from the Museum," *AMNH.org*.

<sup>9</sup> NYC Parks, "Theodore Roosevelt Park," *NYC Parks.org*.

<sup>10</sup> Harriet F. Senie, "Addressing Monumental Controversies in New York City Post Charlottesville," in *Teachable Monuments: Using Public Art to Spark Dialogue and Confront Controversy*, eds. Harriet F. Senie, Jennifer Wingate and Sierra Rooney, 120. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

The statue depicts a towering Roosevelt on horseback flanked by two figures, one Native American and one African man. The position of the figures next to Roosevelt, according to Fraser himself, supposedly represents 'Roosevelt's belief in the unity of the races,'<sup>12</sup> and the Roosevelt Memorial Commission, upon viewing the architect's design, maintained in 1928 that the figures made up a 'heroic group symbolising the fearless leadership, the explorer, benefactor and educator.'<sup>13</sup> The two figures were intended by their sculptor to be allegorical, representing the continents on which Roosevelt hunted (North America and Africa), assisting him as gun-bearers and guides.<sup>14</sup>

The statue's origin and construction are of relevance to the contestation, as defenders of the statue have been keen to point out that, unlike some monuments, this statue is a credible work of art by a known artist. Art historian Harriet F. Senie describes the statue's basis in European art: 'The composition of the central figure on horseback is based on the well-known Renaissance statue of the Venetian condottiero, Bartolomeo Colleoni by Andrea del Verrochio, while the horse followed the general proportions of Roosevelt's Man of War.'<sup>15</sup> However, it has also been fiercely critiqued for being paternalistic, with the pyramidal composition of the Equestrian Statue having been interpreted as invoking a hierarchy of racial authority which 'the museum and members of the public have long found disturbing.'<sup>16</sup> Andrew Ross, Director of American Studies at New York University argued 'the portrayal of the superiority of his figure on horseback [with] half-naked African and Native American [men] carrying his rifles on foot is a very stark illustration not of racial unity but of racial hierarchy.'<sup>17</sup> This is also a highly unusual composition for this era, as typically such figures were not depicted with firearms.<sup>18</sup>

The monument has been seen as further problematic because of Roosevelt's and the AMNH's association with the eugenics movement. The AMNH hosted two conferences for the International Eugenics Congress – a now thoroughly discredited idea of selective breeding of humans to eliminate certain traits or races, and advance others – in 1921 and 1932.<sup>19</sup> The president of the American Museum of Natural History (1908-1933), and head of the New York State Memorial Commission (1924-1935), Henry Fairfield Osborn, was a prominent figure in the field of eugenics, and personally knew Roosevelt, who himself commented favourably on some aspects of eugenics, and it is 'safe [to assume] that the monument ended up here as a result of Osborn's efforts.'<sup>20</sup> In the context of this association, as well as the physical composition of the statue, protestors have found grounds for criticism.

## History of the Contestation

---

<sup>12</sup> AMNH, "The Meaning of a Monument," *AMNH.org*, June 22, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> AMNH, "Addressing the Statue - 6/10/20 statement from the Museum," *AMNH.org*.

<sup>17</sup> AMNH, "The Meaning of a Monument," *AMNH.org*, June 22, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> NYC Parks, "Theodore Roosevelt Park," *NYC Parks*.

<sup>20</sup> AMNH, "Addressing the Statue," *AMNH.org*.



Contestation over the monument is not focussed solely on the central figure of Roosevelt but rather on the composition of the work as a whole, which is commonly perceived as showing a racist hierarchy. While Roosevelt is mounted on horseback, the Native American and African figures are on foot, scantily dressed, on either side of Roosevelt as he towers above them.

In a city known for diversity, the iconography of the monument suggests to many an uncomfortable and racist posture. The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) is one of the most recognisable buildings in New York and is a popular tourist attraction – well known to New Yorkers but also encountered by outsiders, and attracts millions of visitors every year.

Despite its status as a favoured tourist attraction, the Museum itself also has negative connotations for some, due to its early links to the eugenics movement. Prior to the atrocities of the Second World War, which discredited the field entirely, eugenics was of interest to many people involved in progressive politics and the conservation movement. The AMNH hosted several major international conferences on eugenics.<sup>21</sup> In recent decades, this legacy has tainted the reputation of the Museum.

While the debate around this statue has become intense and mainstream only in the last few years, some criticism can be traced much further back. David Hurst Thomas, the Museum's curator of anthropology, who works closely with Native Americans, has said that there have been 'at least two' protests against the statue every decade for the past fifty years.<sup>22</sup> The first protest against the *Equestrian Statue* occurred on June 14, 1971, when 'six young American Indians were arrested and accused of defacing the state's memorial to President Theodore Roosevelt with several buckets of red paint.'<sup>23</sup> Hurst Thomas said that this action was a result to the insult Native Americans took from their depiction in the statue..<sup>24</sup> The six protestors were arrested and charged with criminal mischief after defacing the statue.<sup>25</sup>

Since then, the monument has figured prominently as a rallying point and a site of protest. In 2016, hundreds of protesters assembled outside of the Museum to protest the Roosevelt statue and the Museum's offensive 'exotisation' of certain groups' histories. The protesters demanded an end to white supremacy by removing the statue of Roosevelt, who they claim espoused white supremacist views. They called for 'decolonising' the Museum, and changing Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples' Day.<sup>26</sup> Their actions were intended to highlight the Museum's role in having promoted American colonialism, since Roosevelt himself had been an important figure in the history of U.S. imperialism. Historian William E. Leuchtenburg branded Roosevelt an 'unapologetic

<sup>21</sup> A listing for the published papers of the Third International Congress of Eugenics held at the AMNH in 1932 lists the subjects discussed as including 'race amalgamation' and 'positive and negative eugenics.' It notes that 'those who endeavour to keep abreast of advances in [eugenics] will find this volume most useful.' "A Decade of Progress in Eugenics. Scientific Papers of the Third International Congress of Eugenics Held at American Museum of Natural History, New York, August 21-23, 1932." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 104, no. 10 (1935), 859.

<sup>22</sup> AMNH, "The Meaning of a Monumen," *AMNH.org*.

<sup>23</sup> Lesley Oelsner, "Six Indians Accused of Defacing Theodore Roosevelt Statue Here," *New York Times*, June 15, 1971.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy Coleman, "Angered by This Roosevelt Statue? A Museum Wants Visitors to Weigh In," *New York Times*, July 15, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Lesley Oelsner, "Six Indians Accused of Defacing Theodore Roosevelt Statue Here," *New York Times*, June 15, 1971.

<sup>26</sup> Mazin Sidahmed, "Take down 'racist' Theodore Roosevelt statue, activists tell New York museum," *Guardian*, October 11, 2016.

imperialist', citing the former president's role in Cuba, Guam, the Philippines and Panama.<sup>27</sup>

After the violent 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (August 11 - 12 2017), prompted by the city's decision to relocate a controversial statue of Civil War General Robert E. Lee on horseback, the *Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt*, and many other statues across America became the focus of attempts to remove what were perceived to be glorifications of America's racist past. In October 2017, members of the Monument Removal Brigade doused red paint on the statue and released a statement saying 'Now the statue is bleeding. We did not make it bleed. It is bloody at its very foundation.'<sup>28</sup> According to the Monument Removal Brigade, the act was designed to force the Museum to rethink its 'colonial mentality' - '[t]he true damage lies with patriarchy, white supremacy, and settler-colonialism embodied in the statue.'<sup>29</sup>

Protests against the statue escalated after the killing of George Floyd in 2020. The Museum's rethinking seemed to occur in response to the widespread Black Lives Matter protests that summer.

### *Public Attention*

This dispute has been relatively high profile, partly due to a perception of it as part of a trend of toppling statues. Some commentators, such as Atlantic contributor Eliot A. Cohen, have used this as an example of this trend going too far, contrasting its removal to the more-appropriate removal of Confederate statues.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, author Michael Cullinane approves of removing 'a celebration of Roosevelt's worst qualities' and goes as far as to say that Roosevelt himself would not approve of the statue, pointing out that in his life Roosevelt expressed a distaste for plans for his memorialisation.<sup>31</sup>

### *Alternative Interpretations of the Statue*

Some critics of the statue's removal have questioned its interpretation. Art historian Harriet Senie argues that while the three men in the statue are arranged in 'distinct hierarchy,' the appearances of the Native American and African men flanking Roosevelt are 'in no way abject,'<sup>32</sup> but rather have a powerful, almost regal air. The African figure is depicted with signs of scarification on his body, which is a symbol of status in many African cultures.<sup>33</sup> The Native Americans' representation was likely in line with the trope of the 'Noble Savage,'<sup>34</sup> which was popular at the time. Whilst this trope is rather an uncomfortable stereotype today, it may have been intended as a sympathetic and dignified

<sup>27</sup> W.E. Leuchtenburg, "The American President: From Teddy Roosevelt to Bill Clinton," New York, Oxford University Press, 2015. 40.

<sup>28</sup> Colin Moynihan, "Protestors Deface Roosevelt Statue Outside Natural History Museum," New York Times, October 26, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Sinclair Devreux Marber, "Bloody Foundation? Ethical and Legal Implications of (Not) Removing the Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt at the American Museum of Natural History," 43 Colum. J.L. & Arts 85 (2019), 85.

<sup>30</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, "A Profoundly Unserious Way of Dealing With the Past," Atlantic, June 24 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Cullinane, "Theodore Roosevelt would be the first to agree: His statue should come down," Washington Post, June 23, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Harriet F. Senie, "Addressing Monumental Controversies in New York City Post Charlottesville," in *Teachable Monuments: Using Public Art to Spark Dialogue and Confront Controversy*, eds. Harriet F. Senie, Jennifer Wingate and Sierra Rooney, 120. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> James Green cited in *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>34</sup> Thayer Tolles and Marcai F. Vilcek cited in *Ibid.*, 120.

depiction of a Native American. Fraser's best known sculpture 'The End of the Trail,' also depicts a Native American and was intended as a sympathetic depiction of the plight of Native Americans.<sup>35</sup> Senie suggests that the two figures may in fact be intended as allegorical representations of the continents of America and Africa, where Roosevelt conducted his hunting expedition. She points out the reliefs behind the figures showing native wildlife of those continents, and the frequent use of allegorical figures in contemporary sculptures, including Fraser's other work.<sup>36</sup> More generally, Senie expresses concern that only one interpretation of the statue has been allowed to dominate, and worries that memorials are often viewed as having one set, literal meaning, rather than being seen as worthy of interpretation, like all other works of art. Senie is among those who point out the educational potential of public memorials, which can be thought of as 'teachable monuments.'<sup>37</sup>

### *Complicated position of Roosevelt himself*

The debate around this statue has been largely focussed around the perceived racial hierarchy symbolised by the sculpture's composition, rather than about Roosevelt himself. This is in contrast to debates about other statues around the world, which involved intense biographical scrutiny of the statues' subjects. This is despite credible evidence that the president held distinctly racist views, particularly towards Native Americans. He is reported as saying: 'I don't go so far as to think that the only good Indians are dead Indians, but I believe nine out of ten are, and I shouldn't like to inquire too closely into the case of the tenth.'<sup>38</sup> More materially, Roosevelt's conservation movement had a material effect on Native Americans throughout the United States, thousands of whom were dispossessed for the creation of conservation areas. Roosevelt expressed approval for eugenic ideas on multiple occasions.<sup>39</sup> To complicate matters, however, Roosevelt is also remembered for speaking out in favour of racial equality in several instances.<sup>40</sup>

That the museum's removal of the statue is due to its symbolism, rather than a discomfort with the association to Roosevelt, is illustrated by the fact that at the same time it announced its request that the statue be removed, the museum also announced they would be naming the Hall of Biodiversity in honour of Roosevelt. The seeming willingness of people to admire Roosevelt for his conservation and his presidency, despite his problematic attitudes to race is interesting. On one hand, it could indicate a potentially disturbing inclination to sanitise the reputation of Roosevelt: is it right to draw attention to Roosevelt's contributions and at the same time remove evidence of his flaws? By removing what is seen as his most egregious racist association, but continuing to

<sup>35</sup> James Earle Fraser: *The American Heritage in Sculpture* (exhibition catalogue), from the James Earle Fraser Estate, Syracuse University Art Collection, Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, January 12-April 21, 1985, cited in William S. Walker, "Should the Statue of Theodore Roosevelt Outside the American Museum of Natural History Be Removed: A Possible Compromise," in *Controversial Monuments and Memorials: A Guide for Community Leaders*, ed. David B. Allison, 136. Lanham, Maryland: American Association for State and Local History Book Series, 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Harriet F. Senie, "Addressing Monumental Controversies in New York City Post Charlottesville," in *Teachable Monuments: Using Public Art to Spark Dialogue and Confront Controversy*, eds. Harriet F. Senie, Jennifer Wingate and Sierra Rooney, 120. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> *Teachable Monuments: Using Public Art to Spark Dialogue and Confront Controversy*, eds. Harriet F. Senie, Jennifer Wingate and Sierra Rooney, 120. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Tim Stanley, "Teddy Roosevelt Laid Bare," *History Today* 62, 3 (2012).

<sup>39</sup> William S. Walker, "Should the Statue of Theodore Roosevelt Outside the American Museum of Natural History Be Removed: A Possible Compromise," in *Controversial Monuments and Memorials: A Guide for Community Leaders*, ed. David B. Allison, 139. Lanham, Maryland: American Association for State and Local History Book Series, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

esteem him in other ways, is the Museum painting a dishonest image of the former President? On the other hand, perhaps the continuing acceptance of Roosevelt memorials, despite a growing understanding of his problematic views on race, indicates people's willingness to form nuanced views of this historical figure. Cullinane suggests that the case offers a useful standard: 'If we honor complex figures, we should make sure we do so in ways that emphasize their enduring contributions, not their worst failures.'<sup>41</sup> Similarly, writer William S. Walker has proposed the statue be replaced with another depiction, which highlights 'those aspects of Roosevelt's career worth remembering and celebrating.'<sup>42</sup>

## Decision-Making Processes

### *Mayoral Commission*

Following the events in Charlottesville in 2017, the Mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, formed an Advisory Mayoral Commission on City Arts, Monuments and Markers. This was a commission designed to provide recommendations for the fate of specific monuments and guidelines for future officials or commissions that may be deciding how to approach other monuments more broadly.<sup>43</sup> It was composed of 18 members with experience in 'history, art, and antiquities, public art and public space, preservation, cultural heritage, diversity and inclusion, and education.'<sup>44</sup> Cultural affairs commissioner Tom Finkelpearl was tasked with leading the commission, which examined historical and contemporary interpretations of the Theodore Roosevelt monument.

The Mayoral Commission's report found that many people do in fact view the statue as an example of racial hierarchy and intrinsically linked to the museum's connections to the eugenics movement.<sup>45</sup> The commission, however, was strongly divided on the fate of the monument, with half believing that additional research was needed before making a determination, half of the commission advocating for its relocation, and a handful of members wishing to contextualise the monument at its current location.<sup>46</sup> The discord between different members of the commission results from a conflicting, diametric remembrance of Roosevelt: some members found it hard to reconcile his status as a former President, Nobel Prize winner, military leader, and environmentalist, with the physically offensive characteristics of the statue, and Roosevelt's and the Museum's association with the eugenics movement.<sup>47</sup> The commission members advocating for further research recommended that the report's evaluative framework be applied to

---

<sup>41</sup> Michael Cullinane, "Theodore Roosevelt would be the first to agree: His statue should come down," *Washington Post*, June 23, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> William S. Walker, "Should the Statue of Theodore Roosevelt Outside the American Museum of Natural History Be Removed: A Possible Compromise," in *Controversial Monuments and Memorials: A Guide for Community Leaders*, ed. David B. Allison, 142. Lanham, Maryland: American Association for State and Local History Book Series, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Harriet F. Senie, who was a member of the commission has cited the guidelines the committee drew up, in Harriet F. Senie, "Addressing Monumental Controversies in New York City Post Charlottesville," in *Teachable Monuments: Using Public Art to Spark Dialogue and Confront Controversy*, eds. Harriet F. Senie, Jennifer Wingate and Sierra Rooney, 120. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Report to the City of New York, *supra* note 3, at 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.



Roosevelt's statue first.<sup>48</sup>

Ultimately, the commission's January 2018 report reads:

Any recommendation would have to balance an ensemble of issues - the physical representation of the figures and its impact on a viewing public; the motivation for the monument's dedication and the artist's intention; the historical values and ideas expressed by this representation - while understanding these ideas are in conflict.<sup>49</sup>

This split decision was not without criticism; Holland Cotter in *The New York Times* stated: 'It doesn't require a sensitivity to subtexts to see that the composition, no matter how you gloss it, is quite literally a white-man-on-top.'<sup>50</sup>

### *'Addressing the Statue' Special Exhibition*

The Museum attempted to contextualise the Roosevelt monument with a 2019 exhibition 'Addressing the Statue,' alongside a website and a Youtube video entitled 'The Meaning of a Monument.' This captured the debate over the Equestrian Statue from both a historical perspective and the viewpoints of modern stakeholders. The exhibition consisted of wall text, images and video interviews with members of the Commission, artists, and museum visitors.

The Exhibition was a forum for expressing alternative interpretations of the statue to be accessed in the public sphere. Philip Deloria, Professor of History at Harvard University argued in the *Assessing the Statue* exhibition in 2019 that the composition of the statue:

[S]peaks to Roosevelt as an American, as a person who happily goes as a dominating white figure to Africa, as a person who goes and takes advantage of the possibilities that [arise] by Indian land being dispossessed...For an American Indian person looking at the monument there's an experience of pain that comes with it.<sup>51</sup>

Conversely, Senie, a member of the commission, defends the statue's composition, arguing that Fraser's emphasis on all of the figures as a 'heroic group' is important, and the statue was a crucial part of a larger memorial to Roosevelt:

In some criticisms, the standing figures were taken to be lesser than Roosevelt. That was never the intention. They are allegorical figures representing Africa and America, emphasised by the animals on the parapet reliefs...The Fraser sculpture is a good work of art by any artistic standards. It's also an integral part of a larger complex, including reliefs, roof figures and murals.<sup>52</sup>

The *New York Times* praised the exhibition, stating '[t]he majority of opinions seem to agree with exactly what's being done, in providing visitors with more information,'<sup>53</sup> however, the exhibition

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>49</sup> "Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers: A Report to the City of New York" (*New York: Mayoral Advisory Commission*, 2018), 25.

<sup>50</sup> Holland Cotter, "Half-Measures Won't Erase the Painful Past of Our Monuments," *New York Times*, January 12, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> AMNH, "Addressing the Statue," *AMNH.org*.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Nancy Coleman, "Angered by This Roosevelt Statue? A Museum Wants Visitors to Weigh In," *New York Times*.

was not universally endorsed. An article in the *Columbia Journal of Law and the Arts* criticised the exhibition for having addressed the statue inside the museum, yet it is 'the public-facing nature of the monument that renders it so problematic,' which the exhibition did not address.<sup>54</sup> In reference to the exhibition, the article stated:

After passing by the Equestrian Statue, one enters the Museum through Roosevelt Memorial Hall, to which the AMNH has made no changes despite the fact that the hall unabashedly celebrates Roosevelt and is adorned with similarly problematic murals and quotations. "Addressing the Statue" is installed in a back hallway of the first floor of the Museum...[T]he exhibition has an air of impermanence, as if after the debate dies down, the AMNH could quietly remove it.<sup>55</sup>

### *Statue removal in 2020-21*

On June 21, 2020, the *Equestrian Statue* was requested to be removed by the Museum - a decision which was later agreed to by New York City, which owns the building and property. This decision came at a time 'when the killing of George Floyd [in Minneapolis]...initiated an urgent nationwide conversation about racism.'<sup>56</sup> The move came as statues, particularly odes to the Confederacy, were being taken down across the U.S; in December 2020, Virginia removed a statue of General Robert E. Lee from the U.S. Capitol, with plans to replace it with a statue of Barbara Rose Johns, a Black woman who played a key role in the civil rights movement.<sup>57</sup> On June 21, 2021, the New York City Public Design Commission voted unanimously to remove the statue, marking the final step after a year of discussion.<sup>58</sup>

Ellen V. Futter, the museum's president, made clear that the museum's decision was based on the statue itself – namely its 'hierarchical composition' – and not on Roosevelt, whom the museum continues to honor as 'a pioneering conservationist.'<sup>59</sup> Though the statue's new home has not yet been determined, the city and museum will coordinate a long-term loan of the statue to 'publicly accessible grounds or a cultural institution dedicated to Roosevelt,' officials with NYC's Public Design Commission said.<sup>60</sup> In a compensatory gesture, the museum is naming its Hall of Biodiversity for Roosevelt 'in recognition of his conservation legacy.'<sup>61</sup>

The Museum intends to keep the plinth on which the statue stands once it is removed, and it will mount two bronze plaques, one of which informs visitors on the significance of Theodore Roosevelt's contribution to the AMNH, the other 'recognising the history of the statue and the reason for its removal.'<sup>62</sup> In place of the statue, the plinth was removed and replaced by an outline on the ground, and the stairway leading to the museum widened so that it is now, instead, framed by the imperial arch that defines the entrance.

<sup>54</sup> Sinclair Devreux Marber, "Bloody Foundation?," 43 *Colum. J.L. & Arts* (2019), 106.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>56</sup> Robin Pogrebin, "Roosevelt Statue to Be Removed from Museum of Natural History," *New York Times*, June 25, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Ganesh Setty & Leah Asmelash, "The Theodore Roosevelt statue in front of New York's Museum of Natural History will finally be removed," *CNN*, June 24, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Public Design Commission Public Meeting, June 21 2021

This is a case study worthy of attention due to its particularly turbulent decision-making process. The case provides a striking example of how current affairs inevitably affect decisions of this kind; the reversal of the decision to keep the statue after only three years shows how quickly a carefully considered decision, on expert advice, can come to be perceived as out of date.

Providing contextualisation and hosting public discussion are very commonly suggested as alternative solutions to taking down monuments by those apprehensive about the prospect of removal. It is perhaps slightly sobering, therefore, that the AMNH came to the decision to remove its statue only the year after hosting an exhibition devoted to precisely those aims.

## Summary and Conclusions

The Equestrian Statue of Theodore Roosevelt had long been the subject of controversy, and its decision to be removed came at a time when George Floyd's death and the Black Lives Matter protests 'forced leaders to re-examine the images in our everyday lives.'<sup>63</sup> Though James Earle Fraser's original intention for the statue was to represent 'Roosevelt's friendliness to all races,' modern interpretations of the statue superseded this message, having viewed it as invoking a racial hierarchy. The decision about the Roosevelt statue was made by a museum that, like others, had previously defended – and preserved – such portraits as relics of their time that, however objectionable, could perhaps serve to educate. It was then seconded by the city, which had the final say, as the statue occupied space on public land. Thus, in the process of finally removing the statue, all stakeholders in the Museum, the City authorities, and the NYC Public Design Commission were consulted.

It is worth considering that in the most extensive review of public opinion, an online poll which was part of the 2019 exhibition, almost half of the respondents were in favour of the statue remaining (and the remaining 50% were split roughly evenly between those wishing for the statue to be completely removed and those advocating a compromise solution such as contextualisation or partial removal). Of course, the public may also have changed its view since 2019, but there is no data. In cases like this, it remains extremely difficult to determine where public opinion actually lies. While there has not (yet) been substantial backlash to the decision to remove the statue, we should not necessarily take this as confirmation that the museum's decision is what the people wanted.

This case is somewhat unique in the context of contemporary statue controversies, as the Equestrian Statue is only a part of a whole which forms the larger Theodore Roosevelt Memorial. Roosevelt's legacy is still honoured in the Museum's Memorial Hall, and the national park itself, but the statue is not afforded the pride of place it once had in the plaza because its composition 'carries a negative cultural message which compromises the very characteristics [of Roosevelt] which the Memorial is meant to honour.'<sup>64</sup> This sentiment is neatly summarised by Theodore Roosevelt's great-grandson, Theodore Roosevelt IV, a stakeholder in the museum, who stated

<sup>63</sup> Alvin Chang, "How centuries of racist images came down in one year - a visual guide," *Guardian*, May 22, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Public Design Commission Public Meeting, June 21, 2021.

"The composition of the Equestrian Statue does not reflect Theodore Roosevelt's legacy. It is time to move the statue and move forward."<sup>65</sup>

Research contributed by Lydia Ludlow and Joseph Ricciardiello

Last updated May 2022

## References

- AMNH. "AMNH Requests the Equestrian Statue on Central Park West Be Moved." AMNH, June 21 2020. <https://www.amnh.org/about/press-center/amnh-requests-statue-removal>.
- Cohen, Eliot A. "A Profoundly Unserious Way of Dealing With the Past." *Atlantic*, June 24 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/statues-and-limitations/613444/>.
- Cullinane, Michael. "Theodore Roosevelt would be the first to agree: His statue should come down." *Washington Post*, June 23, 2020.
- "A Decade of Progress in Eugenics. Scientific Papers of the Third International Congress of Eugenics Held at American Museum of Natural History, New York, August 21-23, 1932." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 104, no. 10 (1935).
- Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments, and Markers: A Report to the City of New York*. New York: Mayoral Advisory Commission, 2018.
- Moynihan, Colin. "Protestors Deface Roosevelt Statue Outside Natural History Museum." *New York Times*, October 26, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/arts/protesters-deface-roosevelt-statue-outside-natural-history-museum.html>.
- New York City Public Design Commission. "Public Design Commission Public Meeting, Monday, June 21, 2021." YouTube video, 2:12:48. Posted June 21, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmYz35R9thg&t=7965s>.
- Oelsner, Lesley. "Six Indians Accused of Defacing Theodore Roosevelt Statue Here." *New York Times*, June 15, 1971. <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/15/archives/six-indians-accused-of-defacing-theodore-roosevelt-statue-here.html>.
- Rooney, Sierra and Harriet F. Senie and Jennifer Wingate, eds. *Teachable Monuments: Using Public Art to Spark Dialogue and Confront Controversy*. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.
- Senie, Harriet F. "Addressing Monumental Controversies in New York City Post Charlottesville." in *Teachable Monuments: Using Public Art to Spark Dialogue and Confront Controversy*, edited by Harriet F. Senie, Jennifer Wingate and Sierra Rooney, 115-130. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.
- Sidahmed, Mazin. "Take down 'racist' Theodore Roosevelt statue, activists tell New York museum." *Guardian*, October 11, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/11/museum-natural-history-theodore-roosevelt-statue-protest>.

---

<sup>65</sup> Robin Pogrebin, "Roosevelt Statue to Be Removed from Museum of Natural History," *New York Times*, June 25, 2020.

- Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Stanley, Tim. "Teddy Roosevelt Laid Bare." *History Today* 62, 3 (2012).  
<https://www.historytoday.com/archive/contrarian/teddy-roosevelt-laid-bare>.
- Small, Zachary. "Defenders of Roosevelt Statue Converge on Natural History Museum." *New York Times*, June 28, 2020.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/28/arts/design/roosevelt-statue-defenders-natural-history.html>.
- Walker, William S. "Should the Statue of Theodore Roosevelt Outside the American Museum of Natural History Be Removed: A Possible Compromise." in *Controversial Monuments and Memorials: A Guide for Community Leaders*, ed. David B. Allison, 140. Lanham, Maryland: American Association for State and Local History Book Series, 2018.

## Figures

- Edwardhblake "Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Hall entrance (detail).jpg." Wikimedia Commons, August 27, 2015.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theodore\\_Roosevelt\\_Memorial\\_Hall\\_entrance\\_\(detail\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Theodore_Roosevelt_Memorial_Hall_entrance_(detail).jpg). (Cover image, cropped)
- Dwen, Matt. "File:Theodore Roosevelt outside the American Museum of Natural History FL1562.jpg." *Flickr*, September 20, 2012.  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mattdwen/15620008735/>. (Figure 1).



## 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.

## Contact information

Marie-Louise Jansen  
Program Director  
+33 66828327  
contestedhistories@euroclio.eu  
www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat  
Riouwstraat 139  
2585HP The Hague The  
Netherlands  
secretariat@euroclio.eu  
www.euroclio.eu

Published by IHJR-EuroClio in February 2021  
This document is copyright © The Contested Histories Initiative 2021

Some right reserved [CC BY 4.0](#)

To cite this publication:  
The Contested Histories Initiative, "USA: Roosevelt Equestrian Statue in New York," *Contested Histories Case Study #186* (May 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.