

What Does It Mean to Tear Down a Statue?

We asked an art historian who studies the destruction of cultural heritage.



By Jonah Engel Bromwich

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Protesters throwing the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston into a harbor on Sunday. Ben Birchall/Press Association, via Associated Press

Confederate statues and statues of other historical figures, including slave traders and Christopher Columbus, are being toppled throughout the U.S. and around the world this week — an outgrowth of weeks of protests over entrenched racism in the United States, reignited by the killing of George Floyd in police custody.

This follows years of debate about public display of Confederate symbols, following the 2015 murder of nine black church congregants in Charleston, S.C., by a Confederate-flag-bearing white supremacist, and the deadly clash in 2017 between white nationalists and counterprotesters in Charlottesville, Va., over the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee.

The art historian Erin L. Thompson, a professor at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, has spent her career thinking about what it means when people deliberately destroy icons of cultural heritage. On Thursday, we called her to talk about the statues.

What are the some of the issues that arise when we talk about statues being torn down?

As an art historian I know that destruction is the norm and preservation is the rare exception. We have as humans been making monuments to glorify people and ideas since we started making art, and since we started making statues, other people have started tearing them down. There are statues from the ancient Near East of Assyrian Kings that have curses carved on them that say ‘he who knocks down my statue, let him be in pain for the rest of his life,’ that sort of thing. And so we know from those, oh, that one strategy of rebellion was knocking down a statue in 2700 B.C.

So it’s not surprising that we are seeing people rebelling against ideas that are represented by these statues today.

I feel as if the reflexive instinct in the academy for a long time has been to preserve anything that can teach us more about history. Is that not the case?

I think a lot of people assume that since I’m an art historian that I would want everything preserved but I know that preservation is expensive. It’s expensive literally in that people have to pay for maintaining these statues — a couple of journalists in 2018 did an amazing investigation for Smithsonian magazine and found that in the previous ten years, taxpayers had spent at least 40 million dollars preserving Confederate monuments and sites.

And then at U.N.C., when protesters in 2018 tore down the ‘Silent Sam’ Confederate statue, U.N.C. proposed building a new museum to house it that would cost over 5 million dollars and almost a million dollar a year in ongoing maintenance and security. So I look at these statues as money sinks. And think about all of the amazing sites of African-American history or Native American history that are disintegrating from lack of funding and think those dollars could be better spent elsewhere.

You mentioned that we’re seeing people rebel against the ideas represented by these statues. Are there other aspects of tearing a statue down that people may not immediately understand or consider?

Throughout history, destroying an image has been felt as attacking the person represented in that image. Which we know because when people attack statues, they attack the parts that would be vulnerable on a human being. We see ancient Roman statues with the eyes gouged out or the ears cut off. It’s a very satisfying way of attacking an idea — not just by rejecting but humiliating it. So it feels very good in a way that is potentially problematic. I’m certainly not advocating for the destruction of all offensive statues in the U.S., in part because it’s very dangerous. Protesters have already been severely injured tearing down statues.

What do the attacks on statues in recent weeks tell us about the protests themselves?

The current attacks on statues are a sign that what’s in question is not just our future but our past, I think, as a nation, as a society, as a world.

Race and Policing ›

Recent Changes Sparked by the Protests

Updated June 29, 2020

- Mississippi lawmakers [voted to retire the state flag](#), which is dominated by the Confederate battle emblem that has flown for 126 years, adding a punctuation point to years of efforts to take down Confederate symbols across the South.
- The Army will [remove photographs of candidates in promotion board hearings](#), senior officials said, as part of an effort to address why so many black officers are being passed over in favor of their white counterparts.
- President Trump [signed an executive to encourage changes in policing](#), including new restrictions on chokeholds. But the order will have little immediate impact, and does not address calls for broader action and a new

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These attacks show how deeply white supremacy is rooted in our national structure — that we need to question everything about the way we understand the world, even the past, in order to get to a better future.

What’s a statue?

I think a statue is a bid for immortality. It’s a way of solidifying an idea and making it present to other people. So that is what’s really at issue here. It’s not the statues themselves but the point of view that they represent. And these are statues in public places, right? So these are statues claiming that this version of history is the public version of history.

You wrote an encyclopedia entry about the destruction of art in which you wrote that the “perceived legitimacy” of the destruction of art has changed since antiquity. Can you talk about that a bit?

So let's think about bronze, because many Confederate statues are made out of bronze, which is a metal that you can melt down and make into something else. The ancient Greeks made their major monuments out of bronze. Hardly any of these survived because as soon as regimes changed, as soon as there was war, as soon as someone could steal the statue, it got melted down and made into money or cannon balls or a statue of somebody else.

This is the history of art, of changing loyalties and changing pasts. We have been in a period of peace and prosperity — not peace for everybody, but the U.S. hasn't been invaded, we've had enough money to maintain statues. So I think our generation thinks of public art as something that will always be around. But this is a very ahistorical point of view.

What do you make of the comparisons between what protesters in the U.S. are doing and, say, what the Islamic State did in destroying monuments in Palmyra?

I don't think we can say that destruction is always warranted or that destruction is never warranted. We have to think about who is doing the destruction for what purposes. ISIS was destroying monuments of a tolerant past in order to achieve a future of violence and hate. These protesters are attacking symbols of a hateful past as part of fighting for a peaceful future. So I think they're exactly opposite actions.

And even practically: Look at ISIS's destruction of monuments at Palmyra, these Roman temples. The effect of that was to destroy the tourist economy of the modern city of Tadmor, next to Palmyra, which made achieving peace and stability in the region even harder because you now have thousands of people out of a job.

ISIS also raised a lot of money: Their destruction was a propaganda act to get people to make donations to the jihadist cause. They sold antiquities that they stole from the museum of Palmyra in order to conduct war. It's a very different context to what is happening now.

Also, I wish that what is happening now with statues being torn down didn't have to happen this way. But there have been decades of peaceful protest against many of these statues, in many cases before the statues were even erected — which have come to nothing. So if people lose hope in the possibility of a peaceful resolution, they're going to find other means.

You said in a tweet that, when pulling down a statue, a chain works better than a rope. Why?

It has less give, so more of the force of the pull will be directly conveyed to the statue.

This interview has been edited and condensed.