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## AIC Position Statement (revised)

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# On Contested Commemorative and Confederate Monuments

*October 2020*

### **Preface**

The mission of the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) is to support conservation professionals in their efforts to preserve cultural heritage. To that end, AIC seeks to clarify the role of conservators as they are tasked with the preservation of monuments deemed to be racist or otherwise offensive or oppressive, especially those located in community spaces.

With the unjust and disputed killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other Black and People of Color, conservators have found themselves in unexpected and uncertain roles in the reignited movement for racial justice. Specifically, they have become key players in one manner of redress: the deliberate dismantling, defacement, removal, relocation, reconfiguration, or outright destruction of contested commemorative and Confederate monuments.

In this moment, AIC is obligated to re-examine prior approaches to preserving cultural heritage when that heritage promotes racist ideologies, ethnic stereotypes, and settler colonialism among other forms of offensive messaging. We are morally compelled to formulate a thoughtful, comprehensive, and inclusive revised Position Statement to inform and guide conservation professionals and community stakeholders as they navigate emotionally charged calls to action.

The following replaces the *2017 AIC Statement on Confederate and Other Historic Monuments*.

## **Statement on Contested Commemorative and Confederate Monuments**

It is indisputable that there exist highly visible monuments in community spaces that, because of their racist imagery and ideals, are repugnant to all who believe in the equality and dignity of humankind. Such commemorative monuments (especially Confederate monuments) were either erected with the intent to intimidate Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) or are today recognized as painful to this segment of our citizenry. Decisions about the preservation of such contested monuments must include and prioritize the views of those subjected to their never-ending visual and psychological abuse.

Conservation professionals who are called upon to work on contested commemorative and Confederate monuments may play a key role in determining the future of these works. It is imperative that anyone involved in decision-making about a contested monument consider the history and context of the work in question and encourage, if not insist upon, the inclusion of stakeholder communities. An unquestioning or exclusive decision-making process on the part of conservation professionals may serve to perpetuate racist messages.

Regardless of the decisions made about a contested monument, conservation professionals have a responsibility to design a course of treatment in keeping with community consensus and according to best conservation practices. The preservation of a monument may include preserving damage such as vandalism done in the name of social justice, since historical precedent indicates that defacement often becomes part of the meaning of the work.

We support the removal of contested monuments from community spaces if this treatment is elected by the affected communities.

For conservators working with contested monuments, Community-centered Treatment Considerations and Definitions are provided below.

## **Community-centered Treatment Considerations**

Options for dealing with contested commemorative and Confederate monuments in community spaces abound. AIC endorses a plan of treatment that incorporates the wishes and needs of the community, particularly those segments of the community who are harmed by the monument's offensive messages and imagery. In this respect, AIC explicitly supports the removal of the monument in question if this is the community's preferred option.

The following are general considerations and cannot address the unique challenges of individual commemorative and Confederate monuments:

- Although artistic value is a factor in commemorative and Confederate monumental public art, in the case of contested monuments, it cannot supersede the importance of social justice.
- Graffiti and other vandalism that is perpetrated against a contested monument can be considered an historical part of the monument. Conservators should document such interventions thoroughly, particularly if considering the removal of protest-related graffiti and other damages. See definition of vandalism.
- Relocation, removal, dismantling, and/or recontextualization of contested monuments should first and foremost consider the wishes and needs of the community, in particular those members who are subjected to offensive messages and imagery.
- Conservators can refuse to conserve contested monuments without violating their professional commitment to the AIC Code of Ethics. Regardless of the nature of their involvement, conservators should not be harassed, retaliated against, or otherwise penalized because of their personal stance or the requirements of their employment.
- Conservators should not feel compelled by the AIC Code of Ethics to protect contested commemorative and Confederate monuments regardless of social and political circumstances; the cause of preservation is best served by aiding in the proper removal or alteration of such works rather than

preserving them at all costs. Conservators should use their best judgement when weighing the needs of the community and conservation ethics in these cases, with the needs of the community taking precedence.

AIC encourages the following:

- The involvement of conservators at all stages of helping to design appropriate procedures for dismantling, removal, storage, access, and reconfiguration of contested monuments.
- The retention of graffiti, attacks, former site footprints, and other evidence of past events as historical features of contested monuments.
- Open dialog with stakeholders to share options for removal, dismantling, storage, access, and/or contextualization. These might include full or partial removal of monuments, preservation of graffiti or other alterations, and repositioning of the contested work (for example, laying it on its side or adding other materials).
- Thorough documentation of all removal and contextualization processes.
- Safe practices in removal to prevent physical injury to all personnel.

*The safety and well-being of community members, preservation professionals, and conservators must have priority at every stage of deliberations and during all ensuing actions.*

## **Definitions**

To clarify this Position Statement, selected definitions are provided below, which are intended to guide conservation professionals and community stakeholders in their deliberations.

### Monument

A monument is a statue, building, mural, mosaic, structure, plaque, or other work erected in a public space to commemorate a person, group, event, or idea. The definition often refers to public sculptural works that are figurative; but, in the

broadest sense, a monument can also be symbolic or abstract (for example the Confederate flag or the name of a landmark).

Statues or other structures placed by or over a grave or dedicated site in memory of a deceased person are personal monuments and are exempt from this Position Statement.

### Contested Monument

A contested monument is one that members of a community deem to be offensive and or oppressive. Examples of offensive content include racist, misogynist, dissonant histories, or the glorification of a system of oppression and/or a person/group that contributed to human trafficking and bondage, genocide, persecution, and conquest. There are many examples of monuments that are especially offensive to Indigenous groups, including conquistador monuments, monuments celebrating the Mission system, white colonial settler monuments, and those celebrating historical figures that championed the removal and genocide of Indigenous people. Some contested monuments may be venerated by certain groups or individuals despite the aforementioned content or for other contributions. We recognize that differing points of view may need to be taken into account when evaluating such monuments.

### Confederate Monument

Confederate monuments are a unique type of contested monument. Primarily statues, buildings, markers, gateways, landscapes, or other structures, these works champion the cause of American slavery and the self-proclaimed “Confederacy” that broke off from the United States and engaged in the Civil War between 1861 and 1865. These monuments represent a person, group, event, or idea related to the Confederacy, including, but not limited to, the “Lost Cause,” “benevolent slave owner,” and “glory” of the “Old South” in a community space. The vast majority of these public works were installed in the early 20th century with the express goal of glorifying slavery as a means of denigrating or threatening African Americans during Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, and after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. As such they are considered especially abhorrent and humiliating to Black Americans. Though grave markers or dedicated sites that

commemorate Confederate dead may also possess the same objectionable content, their placement in burial grounds separates them from this category.

### Community Space

A particular area or place that is in the public view and/or dedicated for use by a community, whether broadly defined as the population of a city or more narrowly defined as the student body of a specific college. These locations might include parks, plazas, playgrounds, transit hubs, highways, or public places in front of civic, commercial, and religious buildings. The term community space is purposely more expansive than public space and includes areas that may be under private or institutional ownership.

### Vandalism

The unauthorized intervention of a monument, artwork or public space. This definition is neutral and makes no value judgement. The actions of vandalism can be additive (such as graffiti or tagging) or destructive (tearing down, gouging, removing original material). Historical precedents abound for both of these sorts of activities on monuments and works of art that represent oppressive or objectionable ideologies or simply historical positions that are no longer palatable or relevant, like veneration of a dictator. Sometimes, for example, in the case of historical graffiti, such unauthorized interventions are considered preservable heritage. Within this context, it is appropriate to state that some of the recent additive and destructive interventions into monuments could be considered protectable heritage under the AIC Code of Ethics.

### Community engagement

Community engagement is the act of including relevant community members and other affected stakeholders to help determine the treatment of a monument, including its removal and reinterpretation. Because so many contested monuments, particularly Confederate monuments, were installed in community spaces with the goal of encouraging oppression of the BIPOC members of those communities, AIC encourages conservators, preservation practitioners, and community leaders to incorporate input from BIPOC individuals and groups when determining the future of these works. We encourage conducting community-

centered discussions in a manner that avoids retraumatizing those already harmed by these monuments and the ideals they uphold, and strongly recommend that such discussions include a conservator to help stakeholders make informed decisions about treatment options. Conservators can offer the necessary expertise to ensure the safety of all involved parties, utilize the appropriate treatment techniques, and preserve the material history of the monument as deemed appropriate by the community of stakeholders.

—*AIC Board of Directors*

*The AIC Board of Directors thanks the Confederate/Contested Monuments Working Group for their contributions to this statement.*