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Diversity of Voices Essential for Public Art History

I read late (as usual) Laura M. Holzman’s introduction and the five responses provided by guest writers/scholars/curators in the fall 2019 issue of *Panorama*. And I thought it was all terrific. And long overdue.

In asking, “Isn’t it Time for Art History to Go Public?” society has brought us to this point. Art history itself has not. Today is a memorial service for George Floyd in Minneapolis. And today, Ralph Northam, the Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, announced that the Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond is finally coming down. This issue of *Panorama*, when it is published, will likely coincide with the actual monumental removal. Art history has been forced into something of a reckoning, but many places remain steadfast in their opposition to monument removal. Yes, Richmond saw the installation of Kehinde Wiley’s equestrian *Rumors of War* in 2019 thanks to private philanthropy, but it took the death of yet another black man, and the daily and nightly protests of thousands of people across the nation and the world, to make legislators move. Due to new political leadership, Northam had at his disposal the ability to remove the Lee Monument, which sits on state land surrounded by the City of Richmond, for many months before making his decision this week.

In Virginia, history—and in this case, art history—was in service not to the greater good, but to the Lost Cause. Now, it seems, these Gilded Age monsters (so beautiful, some of them, in their sophisticated production; so ugly in their intent) have become serviceable in a different way. In Northern Virginia, at least, Confederate monuments are touchstones for social action, and in places such as Alexandria, the contemporary public art movement is already in play and has been for some time. But there is a distinct dividing line, and it is no longer the Mason Dixon line. The rest of Virginia and the South will not go so “fast”—unless you think that 150-plus years of Confederate monuments in our midst is a short time for change. Here the efforts of the public, using local museums as platforms, can help push for change, if museum leaders have the moral courage to do so against the onslaught of vocal, political, and personal attacks that will come.

In my chapter “An Independent Scholar of Art History Outside the Academy and Museum” in the upcoming book *Independent Scholars Meet the World* (Christine Caccipuoti and Elizabeth Keohane-Burbidge, eds., University Press of Kansas, October 2020), I describe an art history museum-based experience that three years later, I can’t let go. On one day in Washington, DC I took two tours, one of the presidential portrait collection at the National Gallery of Art, led by an experienced and knowledgeable museum educator, and the second, a tour of the same kind of visual culture of presidential portraits at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery. This second tour, led by DeLesslin “Roo” George-Warren, Catawba, of the Indigenous Corps of Discovery, was an intervention-style project sponsored

not by the museum, but by Humanity in Action (<https://www.humanityinaction.org/usa-about>). As I wrote in my essay:

I have been on many a museum tour, but rarely do museums hire folks from outside to be their educators. The Indigenous Corps of Discovery tour is a great example of why this should happen more often. I learned things about being a contemporary member of a tribe that I would not have learned from anyone else—even well-meaning, highly trained educators who study Native American history would not be able to articulate what it feels like to inherit and live indigenous identity every day.

George-Warren wasn't there to talk like a museum educator, or to keep things "pleasant," as so many tours and exhibits strive to do—and if you ever work with/for a municipality or Federal entity you know how limiting and frustrating this can be. I think George-Warren's tour of presidential portraits impacted me so much because when art history goes public, it is liberating.

What I appreciated most about the Holzman editorial and accompanying responses was hearing about the different ways in which scholars engage with different publics. It reminds me that there are many people—on the ground, working everyday inside and outside of museums—to change the elitism that has excluded most people from appreciating art history as a tool for learning, for social change, supporting empathy for individuals, and for the development of society as a whole.

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Editors' Note: In the fall of 2019, we solicited responses to our Bully Pulpit, "Isn't It Time for Art History to Go Public?" guest-edited by Laura M. Holzman. To see all four responses, please visit <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/panorama/article/talk-back-issue-6-1>. To see the original Bully Pulpit, please visit <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2271>.