

The Monumental Crisis of Theodore Roosevelt

Shadman Chowdhury

Carla Repice and Rachael Schwabe

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I have been taught in school that anyone deserving of a statue in the first place was implicitly viewed as a model of integrity, delegation, or whatever other virtue attached to that specific act of remembrance. One example of this is the Theodore Roosevelt Monument, in front of the American Museum of Natural History. This monument has had many celebrations around it, however, the idea behind it has also angered many people. In this paper, I will explore the context and the controversy of the monument as well as offer an assessment for its cultural value.

Born in New York City in 1858, President Theodore Roosevelt became one of the nation's greatest defenders of wildlife and wildlands.<sup>1</sup> No other president has matched Roosevelt's record in preserving wildlife or in managing the United States' natural resources—forests, land and water—through legislation, executive action, and public persuasion. Theodore Roosevelt served as the President of the United States from 1901 to 1909. His presidency introduced the Square Deal domestic program, which had three basic ideas known as the “three C’s”: conservation of natural resources, control of corporations, and consumer protection. Roosevelt has also been praised for ending the coal strike of 1902 and he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for ending the Russo-Japanese War in [September 5, 1905].<sup>2</sup> Roosevelt's engagement with nature has been commemorated by a two-story monumental statue the American Museum of Natural History and a memorial inside the museum. Originally designed by John Russell Pope, the memorial includes four stages of his life: as a young naturalist, a firsthand observer, the conservation president, and the lifelong explorer. Additionally, the memorial includes murals of Roosevelt's expeditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Kelly Barnard and Whitney Barlow, “Teddy Roosevelt” (New York State Conservationist, December 2012), 2.

<sup>2</sup> A&E Television Networks, “Theodore Roosevelt Biography,” <https://www.biography.com/people>, July. 31, 2014.

A dominant feature of the Theodore Roosevelt Monument is the equestrian statue of Roosevelt (the statue of a horse rider) made of bronze by the sculptor James Earle Fraser, in 1939. Standing on either side of him are an American Indian and an African. The monument stands in front of the Central Park West entrance to the American Museum of Natural History. For the Arts of Peace Memorial in Washington D.C., Fraser made a pair of statues of Pegasus depicting the themes Music and Harvest, and Aspiration and Literature (figure 1).<sup>3</sup> This equestrian monument was therefore intended to be seen in that context, with Roosevelt mounted on Pegasus, though in fact he wears the clothes of a hunter (figure 2) accompanied by two pedestrian guides representing America and Africa. Roosevelt wears a hunting costume because he had more than 500 animals kills on during his safari in Eastern Africa.

The Roosevelt Monument was meant to commemorate Theodore Roosevelt as a devoted naturalist and author of works on natural history. The museum was proud of its historic association with the Roosevelt family. Roosevelt's father was one of the co-founders of the museum. However, the monument itself has communicated a racial conflict that the museum and the public have long found disturbing. The statue has been defaced at least twice over the last few decades, including in 2017 when protesters, who identified themselves as members of the Monument Removal Brigade, splashed red liquid representing blood over the statue's base (Figure 3). This had created many social conflicts. Roosevelt's own racist views, including statements about Native Americans and Africans, complicate the monument's implications even further. The protestors later published a statement on the art website Hyperallergic, calling for its

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<sup>3</sup> C. Chesek, "Addressing the Statue," American Museum of Natural History, <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions>, July. 31, 2019

removal as an emblem of “patriarchy, white supremacy and settler-colonialism.”<sup>4</sup> Those in favor of taking it down say the monument does not represent the city’s values in the way that art in public spaces should.<sup>5</sup>

Mabel O. Wilson, an architectural design professor at Columbia University who served on the city commission to reconsider the statue and was consulted on the exhibition, wants to see the statue moved elsewhere. Wilson had many thoughts about the Roosevelt monument. In speaking with her, she expressed that she has always hated that statue. Whenever she walks past it, the statue gives her a feeling of discomfort. In our conversation, she also observed that “you’ve got this black guy and a Native American guy on either side [and there’s] something really unequal about that.”<sup>6</sup> In 2017, Mayor Bill de Blasio established a commission to evaluate a number of controversial monuments around the city, including the Roosevelt statue. The city determined that the statue would remain in place to add context, which upset many members of the public. The public wanted the statue to get removed.

I agree with the people who have some conflict toward the statue. According to the evidence, the Theodore Roosevelt Monument represents racial ideas and according to various sources, Roosevelt had many racial views. It should be taken down to prevent future social conflicts. The two people next to him, America and Africa, represent racial inequality, because it shows Roosevelt using them to pull him. The statue should just have Roosevelt and not the Indian or African on his sides. Also, the statue depicts Roosevelt as a wildlife defender, but he

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<sup>4</sup> Colin Moynihan, “Protesters Deface Roosevelt Statue Outside Natural History Museum,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Coleman, “Angered by This Roosevelt Statue? A Museum Wants Visitors to Weigh In,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Mabel O Wilson, Interviewed by the author, Digital recording. New York City, NY, July 24, 2019.

hunted a lot of animals. It should be taken down to prevent future social conflicts. Having done research in this topic has made me realize that some statues do not fit the description for an ideal monument.



**Figure 1:** Theodore Roosevelt in hunting clothes.

**Source:**

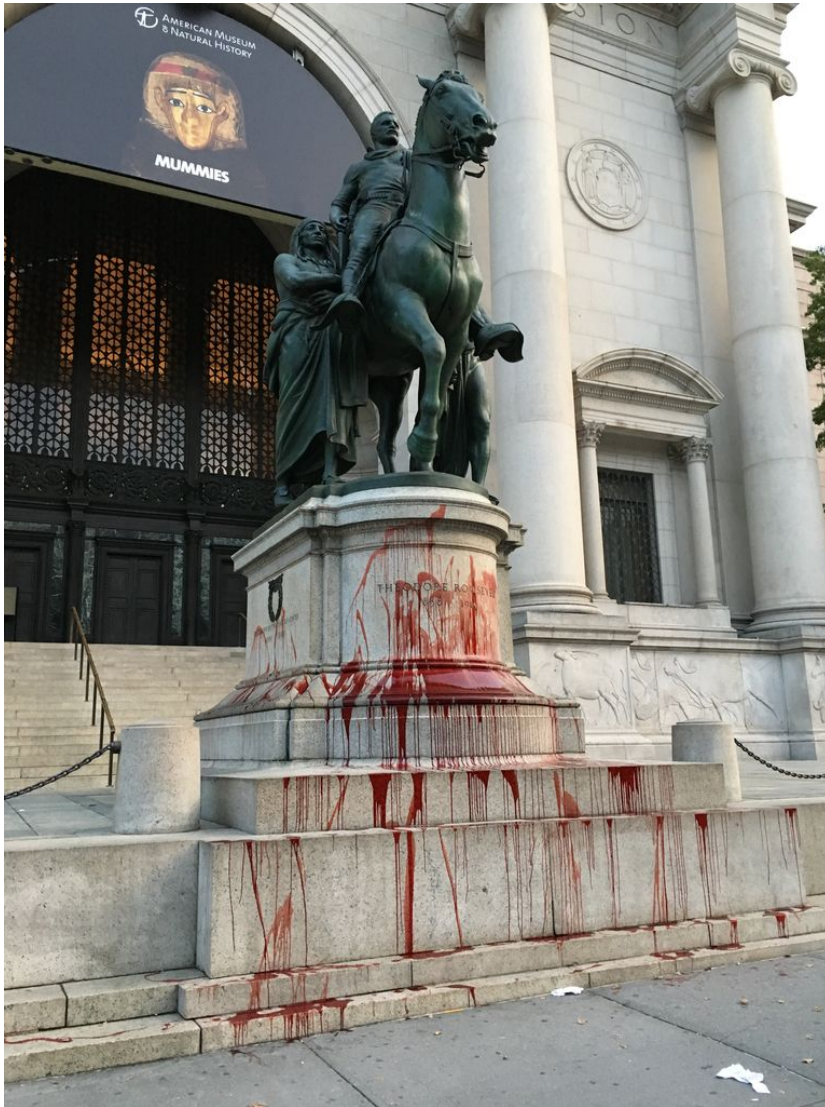
<https://www.google.com/search?safe=strict&tbm=isch&q=roosevelt+in+hunter+cloth>



**Figure 2:** Statue of Pegasus depicting the themes Music and Harvest, and Aspiration and Literature.

**Source:**

[http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMW9KZ\\_Music\\_Harvest\\_Pegasus\\_Washington\\_DC](http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMW9KZ_Music_Harvest_Pegasus_Washington_DC)



**Figure 3:** Roosevelt Monument splattered with paint.

**Source:** <https://hyperallergic.com/407921/activists-splatter-roosevelt-monument-amnh/>