

Rethinking Monuments

Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885)

by Franklin B. Simmons



Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885), 1894

Franklin B. Simmons

(United States, 1839–1913)

Marble, 90 1/2 x 43 x 27 inches

THEMES

- Power and visualization of power
- History (Civil War to present)
- Narrative
- Public Art/Collective memory
- Identity and Representation

Content Areas and Standards Met

What Maine Ed Standards will this lesson meet?

What content areas does this lesson connect to?

SOCIAL STUDIES

Civics & Government: Students draw on concepts from civics and government to understand political systems, power, authority, governance, civic ideals and practices, and the role of citizens in the community, Maine, the United States, and the world

History: Students draw on concepts and processes using primary and secondary sources from history to develop historical perspective and understand issues of continuity and change in the community, Maine, the United States, and the world.

VISUAL ART

A1. Artist's Purpose

Students research and explain how art and artists reflect and influence culture and periods of time.

C1. Application of Creative Process

Students apply and analyze creative problem-solving and creative-thinking skills to improve or vary their own work and/or the work of others.

E1. The Arts and History and World Cultures

Students analyze the characteristics and purposes of products of the visual/performing arts to understand history and/or world cultures.

WRITING

Inquiry to Build and Present Knowledge

1. Use an inquiry process to gather relevant, credible information/evidence from a variety of sources (e.g., print, digital, discussions, etc.) that build understanding of and lead to conclusions about a subject under investigation, while avoiding plagiarism.

Composing for Audience and Purpose

3. Routinely produce a variety of clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, audience, and purpose.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES

Self-awareness: Linking thoughts and feelings, integrating personal and social identities, examining beliefs and biases, fostering a sense of purpose

Social awareness: Perspective taking, empathy, respect for others, collective agency

Relationship skills: Building communication, social engagement, cultural competency skills

Responsible decision-making: Identifying social problems, evaluating, reflecting

Objectives

What will students do/experience/think about, etc? What is the overall goal of the lesson plan?:

Students will explore the complicated history of monuments and understand why this history matters today

Students will think critically about who is represented in monuments and who is not, along with whose stories are being told and whose are not

Students will utilize creative problem-solving to reimagine their own monuments

Essential Questions

What is the big question that this lesson plan seeks to explore or have students grapple with? Some activity guides may have similar essential questions:

How is power depicted or represented?

How do images of power impact us as we see them, individually and collectively?

How do monuments communicate the values of the time and the people who made this work?



Franklin B. Simmons
(United States, 1839–1913)
Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885),
1894
Marble, 90 1/2 x 43 x 27 inches
Gift of the City of Portland
from the Estate of Franklin B.
Simmons, 1921.26
Image courtesy of Luc Demers

Materials Needed

- Writing or drawing utensil (pencil, pen, marker, etc.)
- Paper
- Scissors (Reimagining Monuments activity)
- Glue, tape, or other adhesive (Reimagining Monuments activity)
- Magazines or paper scraps (Reimagining Monuments activity)

Instructions:

Look

Take about a minute to look at this sculpture. What are you noticing? Where is your eye drawn first?

Respond

Think about and respond to these questions:

- What details do I notice?
- What differences do I see from afar and close up?
- What is happening in this sculpture?
- What type of person do I think this might be? What am I seeing that makes me think that?
- Why might this sculpture have been made?
- What message do I think this sculpture conveys? What visual elements do I see that make me think that?
- Why do I think this sculpture is in the museum?

Write down your responses, share them with someone in your house, or discuss.

**Teacher's note: Use Google Classroom or another online platform where you could set up a chat function or a message board where students could share their responses. Find the way to respond that works best for you and your students.*

Learn

Use this section to learn more about the subject and context of this artwork.

Who is depicted here?

When this sculpture was presented to the people who wanted it made, they hated it. The sculpture was supposed to show Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885), Civil War General for the Union troops and eventual U.S. President, as a strong leader and fearless war captain. The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), a group of Union veterans dedicated to caring for and memorializing soldiers, intended to have this sculpture installed in the rotunda of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. The GAR rejected this monumental portrait of Grant because they believed it fell short of depicting the General in all his military glory. The artist, Franklin B. Simmons, created a new version of the sculpture, which now stands in the U.S. Capitol Building.

This sculpture of Grant was one of many works created to commemorate the Civil War and the people in power at that time. Grant was the leader of the Union troops, the victorious side in the Civil War, and went on to lead what many consider a successful Presidency. As President, Grant attempted to create peace within a divided nation recovering from the impacts of the Civil War. If you look towards the bottom of the sculpture, you will see an olive branch carved into the base—a universal symbol of peace.

The GAR rejected this depiction of Grant because they felt he didn't appear as a powerful military general. Notice how his coat seems to be undone and a bit disheveled. Notice how his weapon is resting beside him. If you were to look at the back of the sculpture, you would notice how the American flag is touching the ground, which it is never supposed to do, according to The Flag Code. The American flag should not touch anything beneath it, including the ground, because great care should be given to the flag. Combined, these details were part of the reason the GAR didn't accept this portrayal.

This sculpture is larger than life-size, which adds to the narrative of Grant as a commanding and monumental figure. It was commissioned to depict power. What other details do you notice that help communicate power or lack of power?

What is a monument?

A monument is a statue or structure created to commemorate a notable person or event. Monuments are often placed in public settings such as outdoor city squares, outside or within public buildings, or even inside museums. Monuments help to commemorate and create public history by visualizing a set of values held by groups of people. Where the monument is placed has an impact on how it is viewed and the values that are expressed. We consider this Grant piece to be both a sculpture in a museum and a monument to a person and a time in history. In the museum, we can interpret the sculpture in relationship to its context and with other artworks from a similar time or objects made from similar materials. With more context provided, we can see these monuments and sculptures as moments in history that we can learn from. When monuments are placed in city centers and outside of government or public buildings, they often lack written interpretation and can sometimes glorify the people or values they depict. Certain people made choices about where to place these monuments and the physical location helps add to the perceived power of the individuals and values depicted.

The choices made by the artist when creating the monument also play a role in determining the meaning. Many monuments, including this Grant sculpture, are large in scale or size. The large scale of these monuments reinforces perceived power or value of the figures. Our perception of the person depicted is affected by the monumental size of these sculptures, wherever they are placed. The materials used in these monuments or sculptures are usually bronze or stone, typically marble. These durable and long-lasting materials add to the idea that these figures, and the values they embody, are permanent, immortal, and unable to be changed or erased easily.



Recontextualizing monuments

The end of the Civil War freed many enslaved peoples; however, Black Americans continue to fight for equality and justice to this day. Many of the monuments and sculptures of the late 1800s and early 1900s that celebrate the perceived heroes of the Civil War are being reconsidered and even taken down.

These monuments often depict people who held racist beliefs and are not representative of the views and values of all the people who encounter them. They are often visual reminders of painful and traumatic histories. Today, people question whose history is celebrated, whose story is told, and what voices have been excluded in these monuments.

In June 2020, amidst a nation-wide movement of taking down problematic monuments, people tore down a sculpture of Grant in San Francisco. While Grant helped to limit the power of white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and fought for Black voting rights, his legacy also includes the oppression of individuals and groups. At one point he was a slaveholder himself and married into a family that held slaves. During his presidency (1869-1877), Grant had aggressive policies that actively sought to inflict violence on Indigenous peoples. Two years into the Presidency, Grant signed the Indian Appropriation Act of 1871, which ended federal acknowledgement of tribes as sovereign nations and began the policies of attempting to assimilate Indigenous peoples. He also initiated military action to contain Indigenous peoples to reservations through multiple wars and conflicts, including the Nez Perce conflict (1877) and the Black Hills Wars (1876-1877) with the Lakota Sioux and their Arapaho and Cheyenne allies. These military campaigns were part of Grant's stance on 'keeping peace' by forcing Indigenous peoples onto reservations. This forceful removing of people from their land happened by whatever means necessary, often resulting in violence or massacre. Grant also oversaw the First Transcontinental Railroad, which both took land and eliminated food sources such as the buffalo from many tribes, ultimately destroying their homes and economies.

For more on Grant's time as president and his relations with Indigenous peoples, please consult the Resources section.

This sculpture now stands in the museum and we can interpret it in many ways. We can learn about Grant's history and understand the many issues involved in viewing a sculpture like this with such a complex backstory. In the museum setting, we have the opportunity to support civic engagement and authentic dialogue through meaningful interpretation and context.¹ Why do you think it is important to hear all sides of a story and to question these monuments of power that surround us? Why do you think we should look at what we consume visually with critical eyes?

Monuments are designed to commemorate or remind people of certain values. Questioning the values that we see on display is a way of participating in a democratic and civic conversation. It causes us to think about what we believe personally and as members of communities. The process of remembering and forgetting histories impacts our future, and we must acknowledge the past to shape the present.

How could we create more realistic and humanized versions of these monuments? What is your perspective on the larger conversation of rethinking monuments? What stories could we add to how we interpret this Grant sculpture? Whose stories are missing from this depiction?

Act

Compare and Contrast

Compare and contrast this sculpture (top) in the PMA's collection to the image of sculpture that was accepted (bottom).

Think about and respond to these questions (remember to ground your responses in what you can see visually represented in these sculptures):

What is similar? What is different?

What visual elements in each communicate power?

Which one do you like better and why?

Which one do you think represents Grant more fully and why?

What would you change about both sculptures?

Write down your responses or discuss with someone.



Ulysses S. Grant sculpture at the PMA.



Ulysses S. Grant sculpture at the U.S. Capitol
www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/ulysses-s-grant



Reimagining Monuments

Reimagine and challenge current depictions of powerful people in monuments and sculptures. Generate your own, new monument. Who is a powerful person in your life that you want to create a monument for? Who is someone in history or present day that you think is doing powerful work?

If you'd like to work from an existing monument as reference, think about a monument that exists either in your community or elsewhere. What would you change or alter about that monument? Would you change the person depicted all together? Or, maybe you would add elements to the current monument that make it a more "truthful" representation for you?

Whether you decide to create a new monument or reimagine a current one, think about what visual elements you will use to help tell the story of who that person is. Everything we choose to include or exclude tells us something about that person and the artist. Think about which details or symbols are important to include and which are not.

What symbols will you use to signify power? Think about scale of the monument—do you want it to be life-size, or smaller or larger? Consider the poses or expressions of your figure(s) if your monument has figure(s) in it. Will you include text or no text? Start by making a list of some words you would use to describe this figure, and then write or draw symbols or visual imagery that help to communicate who this person is.

Once you have some symbols and visual imagery, work on creating a version of your monument on paper. Use a drawing utensil to sketch out your monument, or utilize the process of collage to help create a vision board for your monument:

1. Find scraps of paper, magazines, etc., around your home
2. Gather a glue stick (or tape or other adhesive) and scissors
3. Cut or tear paper or magazines to help communicate your message—find words or images that relate to how you would describe the person you are creating a monument to
4. Arrange your scraps of paper and other materials in a way that helps tell the story of who your monument is dedicated to



Take a Stance

Do some research about the movement to take down monuments—both activists forcibly taking down monuments and institutions voluntarily taking down monuments (and any other monument research you come across). What are your thoughts and opinions about whether these monuments should or should not be taken down? Write a persuasive essay in which you provide evidence that supports your stance.

Reflect and Share

Let's reflect on what we just did and the experience we just had engaging with this artwork.

What was this process like for you? Were there any bits of information or learning that were new for you? How does what you explored with this sculpture relate to what else you know about American history?

The last step in interacting with art is to share your experience with others. Share your reimagined monument or persuasive essay with the PMA! Learning@portlandmuseum.org

Or, share your artwork, thoughts, and writing with others in your home or class.



Resources

www.independent.co.uk/voices/ulysses-s-grant-statue-san-francisco-soldier-politician-a9580091.html

indiancountrytoday.com/archive/ulysses-s-grant-mass-genocide-through-permanent-peace-policy-Ing8OYiNuU6hw6ZgulRA9Q

projects.fivethirtyeight.com/confederate-statues/

www.splcenter.org/20190201/whose-heritage-public-symbols-confederacy

www.history.com/this-day-in-history/nez-perce-fight-battle-of-big-hole

www.nytimes.com/2020/10/05/arts/mellon-foundation-monuments.html

www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-12/acknowledging-past-shape-present

www.legion.org/flag/faq#:~:text=The%20Flag%20Code%20states%20that,the%20flag%20when%20this%20happens

www.smithsonianmag.com/history/ulysses-grant-launched-illegal-war-plains-indians-180960787/

For this lesson plan, we drew inspiration from this Lesson from Facing History and Ourselves:

www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/after-charlottesville-public-memory-and-contested-meaning-monuments



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PortlandMuseum.org

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