Two Public Monuments a Century Apart

by Thomas Schlotterback

The *Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument* of Providence, Rhode Island, dedicated in 1871, is a figurative monument in the classical tradition, made of carved granite and cast bronze. *For Handel*, installed on the campus of Western Washington University (Bellingham, Washington) in 1975, is a highly abstract "built object," constructed of steel beams. Created for similar-sized American cities, the two works are roughly comparable in size, and both were intended as public monuments. Yet they were as different in their mode of commission, presentation, and reception as they are in their form. Indeed, a comparison of these two works reveals much about the radical transformation that has occurred in the production and perception of art in America during the intervening century.

The Providence Monument

The *Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument* was, from the beginning, a public undertaking. It was erected to commemorate the Civil War dead of Rhode Island, as resolved in a general session of the State Assembly in 1867, which also appointed a committee to attend to the details of procuring a site and superintending the construction of the monument "in accordance with the design of Mr. Randolph Rogers, of Rome, Italy."

Randolph Rogers (1825-1892) was a leading American sculptor of the day. (Like many nineteenth-century American sculptors, he maintained his studio in Italy, where he could be closer to classical sources and academic training.) By the age of thirty, he had been called upon to finish the work of Thomas Crawford for the Capitol in Washington, D.C., after Crawford's death. In the year 1870, Rogers was at work on several important public commissions: the Providence monument; *Michigan*, a colossal female figure for the city of Detroit; and a monumental figure of Lincoln for the city of Philadelphia.

Rogers's Providence monument is a complex, multi-tiered work, over forty feet high, surmounted by a colossal allegorical female figure (11' high) in bronze. Symbolizing, according to one source, the "union of the states under a republican form of government and the freedom of all men within that republic," she wears a cap of liberty and a crown of stars; her right hand is extended bearing a wreath of laurel, and her left hand, resting on her sword, holds a wreath of immortelles.

The tier directly under that figure is decorated with cast bronze reliefs of laurel branches and wreaths (symbols of victory since classical antiquity); panels bearing the coats of arms of Rhode Island and the United States; and fasces, symbolizing strength in union. The front panel of the tier below carries the following inscription in bronze: "Erected by the people of Rhode Island to the memory of the brave men who died that the country might live."

Projecting from the base of that tier are four rectangular plinths supporting larger-than-life statues (7'3" high) representing the branches of service: infantry, cavalry, artillery, and navy. In precise naturalistic detail, each figure is depicted in appropriate gear and characteristic service positions—which, the *Providence Journal* noted on the dedication day, "every soldier or sailor will recognize at once."

On the next and broadest tier, with sixteen facets in all, are four bronze bas-reliefs of life-size female allegorical figures. War carries a drawn sword and a shield. Victory, lifting a palm branch aloft, rests on her sword. Peace extends an olive branch with her right hand, and rests her left on a horn of plenty. Emancipation, a slave whose shackles have been broken, stands with hands extended in thanks. Separating these allegorical panels are three-sided projections bearing bronze plaques engraved with the names, ranks, and regiments of the 1,727 servicemen from Rhode Island memorialized in the monument.

After describing the entire work in detail and reporting that it cost $57,000—of which $50,000 was paid to the sculptor—the *Providence Journal* averred: "The monument is well worth the price, and worthy the State, and her brave defenders, in whose honor it is erected."

The Dedication

Especially significant were the circumstances surrounding the dedication of the *Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument*. The date chosen, September 16, 1871, was the anniversary of the battle of Antietam, a fateful conflict for Rhode Island servicemen. The dedication festivities began at 9:30 A.M., with a parade that wound through the city of Providence. Led by a general, the procession numbered over 4,500 marchers, including veterans, the Rhode Island militia, and military units from other New England states. As the *Providence Journal* reported:

> The procession reached Exchange Place at about one o'clock. When the word was given, this great body of men . . . marched in division front up the wide thoroughfare towards the monument. The solid host, the many tattered flags, . . . the brilliant clothes of the citizen soldiers, the gleaming of the muskets and bayonets, and the firm and regular marching to the music of sixteen bands was a sight never to be forgotten by those who witnessed it.

On the reviewing platform, which seated 2,300 persons, were the families of the deceased servicemen, as well as a host of dignitaries. In all, between 7,000 and 10,000 persons were involved in the procession and the dedication ceremony. Countless others looked on.

A program published for the ceremony lists a band overture comprising various national airs, followed by Rossini's "God of Israel," sung by a chorus of more than three hundred voices. Introductory remarks by the governor of Rhode Island preceded the unveiling, described in the *Providence Journal* as follows:

> While the curtain which enveloped the monument was being slowly withdrawn, a dirge was played by the Band. The solemnity of the spectacle touched the hearts of the spectators and drew tears from hundreds. But when the whole structure appeared with its beautiful bronze statues, cheer upon cheer, loud and long, arose from the vast multitudes which filled the square. Mr. Rogers, the sculptor and designer of the Monument being called for, came forward . . . and was loudly cheered.

After a public prayer, the chorus sang "The Lord Is Great." Then followed an oration on the monument. "The erection of this monument has a profoundly important purpose," the speaker emphasized. "It is to perpetuate the remembrance of what the men of Rhode Island did and suffered in behalf of the entire country. It is to aid in quickening the sentiment of patriotism in the national heart."

Finally, the ceremony closed with a memorial hymn—the words of which were undoubtedly written for the occasion: "Raise the proud pillar of granite on high, / Graced with all honors that love can impart. . . . Crowned with the triumphs of genius and art! / Long may its white column soar to the sky. . . . High in Valhallah our comrades are crowned; / There may we meet when life's conflicts are past— / Meet in the great Hall of heroes at last!"

The popularity of the Providence monument was in no way exceptional for its time. As the main speaker at the dedication had noted: "On every village green arises the 'Soldiers' Monument,' with its tale of fidelity and courage which shrank not from every danger, duty, hardship, sacrifice and death." Moreover, the Providence monument's principal figure exemplifies an allegorical type that remained very popular in succeeding years, not only with the general public but with artists and intellectuals. By far the best-known example was Auguste Bartholdi's *Liberty Enlightening the World*—dedicated, with comparable pomp and ceremony, on New York City's Bedloe's Island on October 28, 1886.

"For Handel"

In contrast to the very public circumstances surrounding the creation and dedication of the Providence monument, the installation of *For Handel* by Mark di Suvero on the Western Washington University campus in 1975 was the result of two comparatively private impulses: one, the desire of the director of the university art department's permanent study collection to shape that collection to reflect his own interest in modernist work; the other, the wish of a Seattle art collector and patron, attached to Bellingham by old family ties, to contribute to the culture of the Western Washington area. Thus the collector was approached to contribute a "public sculpture" to the university.

Around that time, the collector arranged to purchase, through an agent, a work by Mark di Suvero and offered to donate the work to Western's then small collection of modern "sculpture." As it turned out, however, the work in question was no longer available for purchase. The decision was then made to invite di Suvero to Western's campus to construct a new work, which would be underwritten by the collector. The public the monument was intended for had little or no knowledge of the proposed work, much less of di Suvero or of the style in which he worked. Though the university's Art Acquisitions Committee approved the transaction, it had no control over the selection of the artist or the work. These controls were exercised by the donor and, to a lesser extent, by the director of the collection.

Though not familiar to the general public, Mark di Suvero (like Randolph Rogers) was well-known in the international art world when he received the commission in question. After his first solo exhibition in 1960, he had been recognized by his peers and by critics as the foremost "sculptor" of built objects—works made of construction materials, often incorporating "found" objects, in mobile/stabile arrangements—for which he is still best known. In 1972, he had had a major exhibition in The Netherlands; in 1975, he had a prestigious showing at the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris and a retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

After touring the Western Washington campus, di Suvero chose a site adjacent to the Music Building of the university's Performing Arts Center for his work, which is designed to echo some of the principal lines of the neighboring buildings. The installation was begun on January 14, 1975, and was completed twelve days later. Built of wide-flange steel "T" beams, *For Handel* is a towering tripod-like construction (27' high, and more than twice as broad in the widest dimension of its base). Though di Suvero originally intended that the steel be allowed to rust, he later had it painted red. The tripod supports a crossing element shaped like a stylized lightning bolt, or a flattened "Z." One leg of the tripod has a broad supporting foot that angles outward; on it are two welded elements in the form of the letter "d." A swing originally suspended from the apex of the tripod—to engage the viewer as a participant in the piece (a device characteristic of di Suvero's sculpture at the time)—broke off when ten students enthusiastically participated in one sitting; it was never replaced.

Di Suvero received $45,000 for the work, paid entirely by the donor; out of that sum, he paid for all materials and construction costs, and for his living expenses. The only public cost involved in the piece was for preparing and maintaining the grounds around the base. Yet critics of *For Handel* have tended to assume—and resent—that it was publicly financed.

The significance of *For Handel* is elusive. From different perspectives, one can discern various letter-shapes: a "K," an "h," perhaps an "A," and several inverted "V" shapes, in addition to the flattened "Z" (or lightning bolt) across the top, and the double "P" or "d" forms welded onto the foot. The exact meaning, if any, of these letters is known only to di Suvero and can merely be speculated about by observers.

> *A schism has developed between the producers and purveyors of art, on one hand, and the general viewing public, on the other. . . . Responsiblity for that schism must inevitably be laid to our academic institutions.*

As for di Suvero's titular dedication of the piece to Handel, the balancing of large formal elements may be intended to suggest the stately repetition of themes and variations characteristic of Handel's large-scale works (though *For Handel* is not markedly different in form from a piece di Suvero entitled *Motu*). In addition, it is possible that the various letter shapes were meant to form an acrostic for *Zadok the Priest*—a work by Handel still used for British coronation ceremonies. But such meanings can only be guessed at.

Reception of "For Handel"

The public response to *For Handel*, quite unlike that to the Providence monument a century earlier, was immediately and overwhelmingly negative. Some of it was voiced even before the work was completed. On January 17, 1975, the following letter appeared in the campus newspaper, under the headline "Strike the Iron before Acceptance Sets In":

> I am writing to protest the construction of the monstrosity in front of the Music Building. . . . The true value of public art lies in its capacity to inspire visions of potential excellence. . . . As an antithesis of this ideal, this tangled mass of rusting steel girders should be removed.

A faculty member wrote to add his voice

> to the growing chorus of resentment against the metal monster erected in a formerly pleasant grassy area. . . . I urge you [he concluded] to . . . demand the removal of this great, grim . . . symbol of the triumph of matter over mind.

Another faculty member was more succinct: "I hope someone forms a committee for removal of that pile of junk that is polluting our sky and our view of the bay." Yet another noted: "To insist on keeping it here, despite overwhelming opposition, reflects an intellectual elitism inconsistent with the values of a democratic society."

Common to much of the criticism was the implication that the work typified a regrettable negation of important human values. As summarized by one student: "*For Handel* is a public symbol of [the University's] and this nation's future—cold, ugly, machine-controlled, and lifeless." Over the months and years following the installation of *For Handel*, criticism of the piece continued. *The Bellingham Herald*, the area's principal newspaper, printed many of the negative opinions. There were myriad cartoons on the subject. And students and faculty circulated petitions to destroy or remove the work.

Clearly in the minority were the defenders of the monument—most of whom were connected with the arts. The head of the Art Department, for example, wrote a feature article for *The Bellingham Herald*, in which he discussed the history of modern art, to put *For Handel* in its proper context, and attempted to identify symbolic, allegorical, and metaphorical aspects of the object. Further, to counter the extremely negative response to the piece, a slide presentation was organized, in which di Suvero discussed his ideas and some of his other work.

One student defender of *For Handel*, answering a letter in the campus newspaper objecting to the "ugliness" of the work, wrote:

> I truly respond to its beauty, not its ugliness. From every angle, the lines

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