

Remember Houston

Stephen Fox

Houston has not proved fertile ground for monuments. Remembering — the activity that monuments stimulate — is apparently too unprofitable to occasion much enthusiasm locally for their erection. There are other problems too: a limited conception of what merits recollection and, most critically, the lack of any conventional forms of conduct for experiencing those monuments that have been erected. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that naming parks, streets, and buildings containing public institutions after outstanding citizens or notable events has come to seem a more efficient means of commemoration than “useless” monuments.¹

To some extent these shortcomings stem from the fact that only twice in Houston's history have there been concerted efforts to make monuments. Both episodes occurred during the first half of the 20th century: the Civic Art movement of the Progressive Era, and the Public Art movement of the New Deal. Both allied artistic production with commemoration, resulting in styles of representation that are easily recognizable. Both also survived as styles of representation in Houston well beyond what is usually considered their historical terms. Yet, with few exceptions, the monuments that were built exist in that peculiar state of suspended animation that seems to pervade everything in Houston connected with the past. By and large these artifacts lack resonance. Disconnected from the life around them, they become — perversely — tokens of the collective amnesia that alienates Houstonians from their city, and keeps them from feeling themselves part of a community.

The earliest monuments in Texas tended to be monuments first, and works of art by courtesy. Not inappropriately, graveyard art accurately describes the style of representation with which these monuments acquired form. The first public monument that can be accounted for in Harris County is the obelisk erected in 1881 above the grave of Benjamin Rice Brigham (one of the two Texans killed during the Battle of San Jacinto) at the battle site. Were it not for patriotic inscriptions and a listing of other Texas victims of the battle, the Brigham Monument (designed and constructed by the Galveston marble cutting firm of A. Allen and Company) would be indistinguishable from funeral monuments typical of late 19th-century American cemeteries. The first public monument erected in Houston, the Dick Dowling statue (1905, originally installed at Market Square, now located in Hermann Park), was the work of a San Antonio stone contractor, Frank C. Teich, whose stock-in-trade was graveyard memorials. This field of specialization apparently was considered sufficient qualification, for Teich exercised a virtual monopoly on the production of public monuments in Texas at the beginning of the 20th century.

Rather than commission such pedestrian work, the trustees of Henry Rosenberg's estate engaged the Italian-born and trained

Washington, D.C. sculptor, Louis Amateis, to execute the first monumental work of Civic Art erected in Texas, the Texas Heroes Monument at Broadway and Rosenberg in Galveston (1896-1900). In the American Renaissance tradition, Amateis combined heroic bronze figures and bronze relief tablets depicting Texas historical scenes in a classically detailed architectural composition. The Texas Heroes Monument remains the pre-eminent work of Civic Art in the state, and it immediately inspired Houstonians, just then beginning to assess critically the quality of the local environment, to look beyond Frank Teich.

It was also to Louis Amateis that the Houston chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy turned to produce Houston's initial work of Civic Art, *The Spirit of the Confederacy* (1906-1908). *The Spirit*, a mawkishly conceived but competently executed allegorical piece, was set up in Sam Houston Park rather than at the intersection of the two widest streets in town as was done with the Texas Heroes Monument. Thus it has always been geographically remote, and today it is most often seen at a distance from outbound cars on Lamar Avenue.

In contrast, Houston's most recognizable public monument is centrally located and highly visible: the bronze equestrian statue of Sam Houston, set up at the entrance to Hermann Park in 1925 and modeled by the Italian-born and trained Houston sculptor, Enrico F. Cerracchio. The Sam Houston Monument successfully fulfills conventional expectations about the role of monuments. Its visibility and accessibility are important factors, as is its specificity. It is a monument to a man (Sam Houston), an event (the Texas victory at San Jacinto toward which, it is said, the figure's extended arm is pointed), and a place and its history (the City of Houston, named for Sam Houston and designated under his aegis provisional capital of the Republic of Texas). The monument connects viewers to a series of experiences that account for the existence of the city.

Cerracchio's Sam Houston was the major work of Civic Art erected during the 1920s. It represented a tendency current in Houston during the '20s to memorialize individuals with art monuments, although most of these were privately commissioned. An early example was the bronze relief plaque of James L. Autry that Will C. Hogg had the Italian-born and trained sculptor, Pompeo Coppini, execute in 1921 for installation at The Autry House, 6265 Main Street. The estate of the developer Henry F. MacGregor retained the New York sculptor Gutzon Borglum to model a bronze relief of a female figure set on a stone backing as part of a fountain constructed at Peggy's Park on Alameda Road (1927) in honor of Peggy Stevens MacGregor, MacGregor's widow. (The sculpture, minus the fountain, now sits opposite Peggy's Point Park at Richmond and Main.) Grandest of all was the heroically scaled, seated bronze figure of William M. Rice as The Founder, the work of the English-born and trained New



Texas Heroes Monument, Galveston, 1900, Louis Amateis, sculptor, J.F. Manning and

York sculptor John Angel, which was installed on the Rice Institute campus in 1930. The standard of artistic production that these monuments represented was consistently high. But only the Sam Houston and Founder's monuments can be considered major works; and they were all that Houstonians managed to erect during the great boom of the 1920s.

At the end of the 1920s there was a resurgence of interest in Texas historical themes that continued through the 1930s. The architect Kenneth Franzheim retained a New York decorative painter, Vincent Maragliatti, to produce eight murals depicting Texas historical scenes in the lobby of the Gulf Building (1929), designed by Franzheim and Alfred C. Finn. Twice more during the 1930s out-of-town artists were commissioned by corporate clients to execute public murals representing Texas historical scenes: John A. McQuarrie of San Francisco for the Southern Pacific Lines at the now-demolished Grand Central Station (1934), and Eugene Montgomery of Chicago for Sears, Roebuck and Company's new store at Main Street and Wheeler Avenue (1939). Of far less consequence was the insignificant Pioneer's Memorial Shaft, erected in Hermann Park in 1936 to commemorate the centennial of Houston — a reversion to the graveyard standard of earlier years.

By the middle 1930s, however, such private works of public art began to be amplified by the unprecedented expansion of the U.S. government into the field of art patronage. Both sculptors and painters, almost all of them Texans and many of them Houstonians, were retained between 1934 and 1941 to produce monumental works of art in public buildings. The themes represented included the by-now-familiar lineup of personages and events connected with the history of the Republic of Texas, as well as local historical events and vignettes of contemporary life, the so-called American Scene. Painting and sculpture remained figural (rather than abstract) in style and epic in character. But in place of the academic conventions of Civic Art classicism, a new, more aggressive realism was preferred. This “regional” style exchanged the nymphs and muses of the academy for new, down-to-earth idealizations: the common man and the common woman, who, moreover, were not always Caucasian.

Public art patronage was dispensed through several programs. The best-known was the Public Works Art Project of the Civil Works Administration, which

commissioned artists to embellish extant public buildings. The Section of Fine Arts of the Public Buildings Administration commissioned artists to provide work for new federal government buildings. New construction projects funded by the Public Works Administration provided for the inclusion of commissioned art work.

In the first category, the best-known local art works were the murals painted in 1935 in the Julia Ideson Building of the Houston Public Library by three Houston artists, Emma Richardson Cherry, Angela McDonnell, and Ruth Pershing Uhler. Uhler's immortal *The First Subscription Committee, 1854*, at the first-floor landing of the main stair, is a resourceful adjustment to an awkward site (a wall containing a window). The theme also was unusual for its specificity: an event pertaining to the history of the public library that occurred in a house which originally occupied the site of the library building. In the second category, the young Houston sculptor, William M. McVey, executed two relief panels in the new Federal Office Building at Fannin and Franklin (1941), and the two most celebrated young artists in Texas, Jerry Bywaters and Alexandre Hogue of Dallas, painted two murals each on the theme of the Houston Ship Channel for the now-demolished Parcel Post Annex Building (1941). In the third category, the architect Joseph Finger retained Daniel MacMorris, a Kansas City decorative painter, to execute the heavy-handed plaster reliefs in the foyer of the new City Hall (1940). Finger also retained the Beaumont sculptor Herring Coe, assisted by Raoul Josset, to produce the much more satisfying relief panels that ring the exterior of the City Hall.²

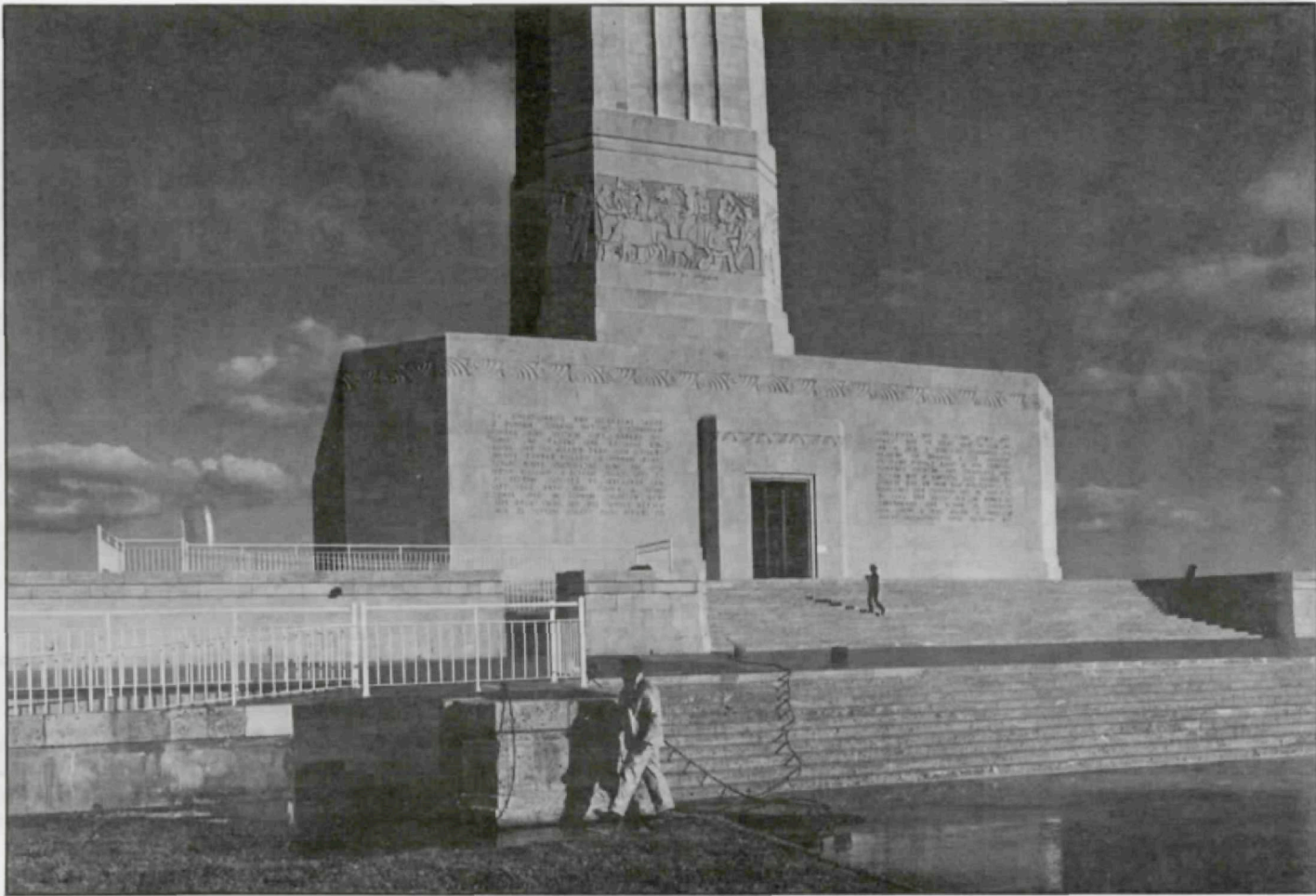
The single greatest monument erected in Texas also was a beneficiary of PWA financing, the 570-foot-high San Jacinto Monument (1935-1938), designed by Alfred C. Finn. Built to commemorate the centennial of Texas's independence, the monument consists of an obelisk crowned by a three-dimensional star, centered above a base containing a museum, and surrounded by broad, raised terraces. A 1,750-foot-long reflecting basin provides a dramatic horizontal counterpoint to the shaft's vertical thrust. William M. McVey was responsible for executing the crowning star, the bronze entrance doors, and the band of reliefs that encircles the base of the shaft.

Yet its size, material splendor, and considerable formal presence notwithstanding, the San Jacinto Monument shares in the condition of



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San Jacinto Monument, 1938, Alfred C. Finn, architect, William M. McVey, sculptor

marginality that afflicts other Houston monuments. In part it is because the monument is located in an industrial corridor along the Houston Ship Channel rather than in the center of Houston. But its extreme hieratic demeanor seems misplaced for other than geographical reasons. In its formal and rhetorical over-determination, the San Jacinto Monument implies a ritualized conduct of public life so at variance with actual practices that it is apt to be experienced as merely a quaint, if not campy, period piece. (In this regard, it is not unlike its Dallas counterpart, the Texas Hall of State at the Texas Centennial Exposition.) In its enormity, the San Jacinto Monument symbolizes the predicament of public monuments in Houston: even though executed at large scale, it has no relationship to public life. It is a curiosity. Despite its visibility from the Ship Channel and Interstate 10, the San Jacinto Monument has never impressed itself on public consciousness like the Statue of Liberty, for instance, or the archetypal Texas monument, the Alamo.³

The representational style embodied in New Deal art continued to be employed in Houston for over a decade after the termination of public relief programs in 1941. During the 1940s and 1950s patronage for monumental art once again reverted to private benefaction. Responsible for the greatest number of significant commissions was the architect Kenneth Franzheim, who time and again managed to persuade his clients to include sculpture and murals in new architectural projects. However, these began to shade into the more generalized realm of public art: works of art displayed in public places but not intended to serve any commemorative purpose.

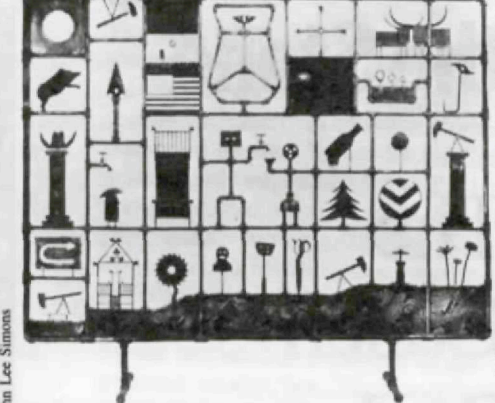
The monumentality of Octavio Medellín's relief panel at Franzheim's Police Administration, Jail and Municipal Courts Building (1952), Peter Hurd's vast, American Scene genre piece *The Future Belongs to Those Who Prepare For It* (1952) at Franzheim's Prudential Building, 1100 Holcombe Boulevard, and, finest of all, Rufino Tamayo's *América* (1956) in the banking hall of Franzheim's Bank of the Southwest Building is diffuse. The first two were perhaps intended to be didactic; the third was sufficiently abstract and allegorical that Tamayo's subject was not immediately discernible. This was fortuitous, for his theme — the mixture of the races inhabiting the American continent — quite likely would have elicited an excited response in race-conscious Houston of the 1950s.

Ironically, the bank did attract national attention when, for fear of community reaction, it rejected a colossal, bare-breasted female figure symbolizing Texas "rising out of struggle and war" that was part of a larger relief by William Zorach, *The New State of Texas*, intended for the main entrance bay on Travis.

Under such circumstances it is not surprising that, with the exception of the Tamayo, the other Franzheim-related works were conservative. This was true also of Edward Z. Galea's relief panel on the Transcontinental Gas Pipe Line Company Building at Travis and Elgin (1951), William McVey's relief panel on the Holland Lodge at 4911 Montrose Boulevard (1954), and even John Biggers's mural, *The Negro Woman in American Life and Education*, at the Blue Triangle YWCA at 3005 McGowan Avenue (1953).

The transition from an epic, figurative, thematically explicit style of art to one that was internalized, non-figurative, and allusive rather than specific resulted in the virtual absence of attempts to erect public monuments in the 1960s, although a piece such as Jim Love's *Area Code* (1962), displayed in the lobby of the Alley Theater, demonstrates that it was possible to secure modernist works incorporating culturally resonant imagery suitable for public installation. When large-scale works of public art began to be installed again in the 1970s they were rarely intended to serve monumental purposes. Most lacked an iconographic program and displayed little interest in inspiring civic virtue or embodying collective memory. Ironically for a city with such a fitful tradition of public art, the quality of the pieces installed was exceptionally high. Yet when these art works were pressed into service as monuments, it was almost always as monuments by implication, whether as a recollection of traditional forms (Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk*, 1966, dedicated to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.), or in the use of indigenous materials (Michael Heizer's *45°, 90°, 180°*, 1984, at Rice University), or simply by the title (Mac Whitney's *Houston*, 1983, at Stude Park).

Several provocative attempts have been made to formulate iconographic styles capable of broader public communication. Ironic archaism and an ingenious synthesis of the values, sources of wealth, and geographical and climatological extremes of Houston inspired Christo's stunning, but unexecuted, *Houston Mastaba* (1974), which was to have been (Continued on page 21)



Houston Ship Channel, Parcel Post Annex Building, 1941, Alexandre Hogue, painter

Area Code, 1962, Jim Love (b. 1927), sculptor. Steel, cast iron, and lead, 86"x 102"x24", (courtesy of Alley Theatre, gift of the Brown Foundation, Houston, Texas)



The First Subscription Committee, 1854, Julia Ideson Building, Houston Public Library, 1935, Ruth Pershing Uhler, painter

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Remember Houston
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Houston Mastaba, Project for 1,250,000 Oil Drums, 1974, Christo, artist. Drawing-collage, pencil, crayons, colored crayons, enamel paint, photostat and map, 30"x22" (76 x 56 cm.) (Photo by Eeva-Inkeri, courtesy of the artist)

constructed of 1.25 million oil drums. Luís Jiménez and Richard Haas both deploy wit and irony in the public monuments they have executed in Houston. Jiménez's *Vaquero* (1979), at Moody Park, exploits lurid colors and action-packed composition to impress itself on viewers; Haas's mural *Houston* (1983), at Town and Country Mall, is American Scene retro, updated with astronauts and traffic jams. Recent submissions to two design competitions – that of Ben Nicholson to the Sesquicentennial Park Design Competition, and that of Peter D. Waldman and Christopher Genik to the "Transformations" charrette sponsored by Young Architects Forum at Diverse Works – although architectural in nature, suggest new ways of imagining and imaging Houston that extract, reinterpret, and objectify local historical and cultural patterns.

Romancing the Stone
(Continued from page 15)

The decision to create a self-reflective entity rather than use the site and program to build upon salient features of the proximate built environment or regional patterns runs counter to present architectural tendencies. It is not hard to imagine a design that attempts to weave together the Glassell School, The Museum of Fine Arts, and the Contemporary Arts Museum (Gunnar Birkerts, 1972) directly across Montrose. One wonders if even a modest effort to establish some spatial or material relationship to context might have added some richness to the final realization. It is, however, ill-advised to make contextual relationships the sole criterion for evaluating a work of design. Once faced with the intention to create an independent object, it must be considered as such, knowing that the success of urban interventions of any sort derives largely from intrinsic qualities that may influence subsequent development by example.

A more serious deficiency in this project lies in the realization of its internal components, which are sometimes at cross purposes with the intention of creating a counter landscape. The use of close-cropped St. Augustine grass to cover the bent planes and sensuous mounds of earth suggests a golf course green that contrasts unfavorably with Noguchi's initial proposal to cover these surfaces with monkey grass, a less ruly and more giving material. The hyper-articulation of each element in the garden and the over-emphatic separation of all materials used in construction from one another is counter productive as well, depriving the composition of a subdued, accepting fabric at appropriate points along the way. The stone objects concealing numerous ground-level lighting fixtures and even trash receptacles prove ill-chosen subjects for monumentalization and wind up crowding the garden so as to distract from the



Vaquero, Moody Park, 1979, Luís Jiménez, sculptor

Manipulating witty, ironic imagery to attract popular attention and developing procedures for translating patterns of life into artifacts are two possible ways to make the necessary connection between the community and objects intended to memorialize it. It is clear that monuments, if they are to stimulate Houstonians into resisting amnesia and remembering their city, must confront the public with itself, make the city visible as a community, and inspire the forms of public life that will perpetuate civic recognition and memory. ■

Notes

- 1 Thanks to Terrell James and Drexel Turner for their insightful critical observations.
- 2 Sadly, one of Houston's most gifted young artists, the painter and sculptor Julian R. Muench, was not retained to execute any public works of monumental art locally.
- 3 On the symbolic potency of the Alamo, see Susan Prendergast Schoelwer with Tom Gläser, *Alamo Images, Changing Perceptions of a Texas Experience*, Dallas: DeGolyer Library and Southern Methodist University Press, 1985.

sculptures themselves. At the other extreme, the banality of the tall, stock lighting fixtures is similarly disconcerting, if less obtrusive. Except for special events, the only provision made for seating (apart from the grassy knolls) are austere, permanently placed concrete benches resembling precast girders – a measure of control that precludes the casual placement of individual chairs. One element that escapes this syndrome of either rigid conformity or indifference is the *mot juste* of the metal grate at the base of many of the trees, which looks marvelous and neither ostentatious nor unconsidered. In all, the avid if occasionally selective adherence to this heavy reductionist palette does more to hinder the presentation of the sculpture than aid it. Because the range of constructed elements is so limited, there is no method of adjusting for objects of a smaller scale, as is apparent in the awkwardness of the presentation of the Robert Graham pieces, and which might discourage further presentation of intimate works. But on the whole, the works of art appear fairly comfortable, perhaps because the collection is such a familiar gathering of works by all the expected artists that it may offer no real test of the space's flexibility.

The passage of time will allow one to evaluate the degree of success or failure of this counter landscape. The inherent problem of the whole strategy is that the "world" here might be only a stage and perhaps an overly determined one at that, despite the greater allure promised once the plants mature. One wonders, though, if the Cullen Sculpture Garden's provocative, slightly surrealist edge might not also fade, and whether its continual call for perceptual and psychological dislocation and awakening will endure. On these accounts there can be little certainty, for like all romances, its essence cannot be fully managed or even anticipated. ■

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