

WHOSE HISTORY? Monuments, Murals, and Public Art

OUR BINATIONAL COMMUNITY of El Paso/ Ciudad Juárez is filled with sites of historical memory. Some are places where large significant events occurred that affected not only local but national and international history. Others are more intimate, evoking memories of individual and family history. Then there are the monuments, murals and public art intended to commemorate or present history to the larger public.

Statues of men on horseback, colorful murals, and historical markers—all put forward a sense of something historical, of times past. We sometimes pass them without noticing. Other times their presence provokes intense public debate over the meaning of history and art or the expenditure of public funds. More often than not, they tell us more about ourselves, contemporary power relations, the work of marginalized groups to be included in the narrative of history, and our own ideas about what constitutes history than they do about history. They beg the question: how do we decide who “deserves” to be remembered through public commemoration and who makes the decisions?



Protest against the Equestrian, El Paso Airport, April 2007. (Photograph by Lucia Martinez.)

In 2007, the almost 40-foot tall sculpture “The Equestrian” was unveiled at the El Paso Airport. Originally named after Juan de Oñate, it was renamed by the City Council in order to deter increasing criticism of the sculpture. The formal unveiling, an event attended by the sculptor John Houser, the Mayor and other dignitaries, was itself a site of historical memory as indigenous people from New Mexico and the El Paso area organized a protest against The Equestrian. Oñate, even by the account of his own chronicler Gaspar Perez de Villagr a, had subjected the people of Acoma and other pueblos to horrendous acts. While proponents of the sculpture argued that “all” history had to be told, the good and the bad, its critics countered that the 40 foot statue glorified an inept conquistador who committed atrocities against native peoples. Regardless of how one views the monuments that dot our urban landscape, it is clear that the memories, emotions, and histories they suggest are powerful.



The Equestrian

Location: El Paso International Airport

Sculptor: John Houser

Inauguration: 2007

Below you will find a series of photographs of monuments and murals in the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez region. They come from a 2007 exhibit at the Centennial Museum on the University of Texas campus, which accompanied a conference titled “Memory and Monuments: Commemorating and Confronting History on the U.S.-Mexico Border.” The photos represent a cross-section of the original exhibit.

We invite our readers to consider the following questions as you pass by any of the many monuments in our region and as you look at the photographs below:

- Who chooses what history is told through public representations of history such as statues, murals, and historical markers?
- Why are some histories chosen over others?
- How are such works funded and who makes the decision?
- How much do monuments shape our understanding of history?
- How do monuments reflect the present time as well as history?
- Whose history is told?



Abraham Lincoln (February 12, 1809 – April 15, 1865)

Location: Avenida Lincoln, Circuito José Reyes Estrada (Cd. Juárez)

Inaugurated: April 1964



Tin Tan (Germán Valdés)

Cd. Juárez plaza across from Cathedral



“La Virgen de Guadalupe”

Location: La Corona Grocery, Seventh and South Ochoa Street

Inaugurated: 1981

Artist: Felipe Adame, assisted by Jesús Hernández



Mural at Sagrado Corazón Catholic Church, El Segundo Barrio

Lead artists: Francisco Delgado and Mauricio Olague, assisted by community members and Bowie High students

2008



Tigua Cultural Center



“Our History”

Location: El Paso County Courthouse, 500 San Antonio

Inaugurated: 1995

Artist: Carlos Callejo



Fray García de San Francisco (ca. 1603 - January 22, 1673)

Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, Ciudad Juárez



Meeting of Manso people and Fray Garcia de San Francisco

Location: Bulevar Cuatro Siglos Paso del Norte (Cd. Juárez)

Inaugurated: April 5, 2001

Sculptor: Juan Carlos Canfield



Francisco Vásquez de Coronado

Location: Centennial Museum, University of Texas at El Paso

Inaugurated: 1945

Artist: Salvador López



El Inmigrante Árabe

Location: Prolongación Ignacio Mejía y Avenida Adolfo López Mateos (Cd. Juárez)

Inaugurated: October 2000

Sculptor: Juan G. Van Der Elst



Father Carlos Pinto

Location: Sagrado Corazón Church, Oregon Street



Abraham Lincoln (February 12, 1809 – April 15, 1865)

Location: Avenida Lincoln, Circuito José Reyes Estrada

Inaugurated: April 1964



Buffalo Soldier

Location: Robert E. Lee entrance to Fort Bliss

Sculptor: Bob Snead?

Inaugurated: February 5, 1999



Pancho Villa (June 5, 1878 – July 23, 1923)

Location: Paseo de la Victoria y Avenida De la Torres

Inaugurated: August 28, 2001

(Photographs courtesy of the Centennial Museum, the University of Texas at El Paso.
Photographs by Scott Cutler.)