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Commemorations: Art from Sheldon's Permanent Collection

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commemorations

Art from Sheldon's Permanent Collection

Vik Muniz. *Lincoln After Brady* (from *Pictures of Ink*), 2000. Cibachrome color print. UNL–Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Goldberg by exchange, U-5121.
Art © Vik Muniz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

25th Annual Sheldon Statewide Exhibition, 2011–12

Sheldon Museum of Art • University of Nebraska–Lincoln

A Brief History of Sheldon Statewide

Commemoration—the theme of this year's exhibition—is particularly appropriate, as 2012 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Sheldon Statewide. The program began in 1987 as a joint effort of the Sheldon Museum of Art and the Sheldon Art Association, then known as the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and the Nebraska Art Association. Conceived as a project of the association's Statewide Committee, chaired by Lois Roskens, it was part of the group's centenary celebrations. From its first exhibition, *Miniature Masterworks*, Sheldon Statewide has provided opportunities for communities throughout the state to gain access to original works of art. *Miniature Masterworks*, organized by Sheldon Educator Suzanne Wise, was launched in North Platte, where it succeeded due to the organizational skills of Rhonda Seacrest, the support of the *North Platte Telegraph* and Superintendent of Schools Doug Christensen, and the vigilance of Sharon Skinner. Sheldon docents Nancy Dawson, Lonnie Pierson Dunbier, Phyllis Pauley, Alison Petersen, Jan Roberts, and Ellen Zumwalt worked with local volunteers to provide tours. Over the last quarter century, Sheldon Statewide exhibitions have been viewed in twenty-four Nebraska communities, reached over 275,000 people, and supported additional outreach programs such as *Art in Society: Nebraska*. Venues have included art galleries, banks, historical museums, and libraries in Chadron, Columbus, Falls City, McCook, North Platte, and Scottsbluff, to name only a few. The Sheldon Museum of Art wishes to acknowledge the visionary planning of those who first helped to guarantee that the program became a truly statewide endeavor. In Sheldon Statewide's first decade, Nebraska Art Association President Art Thompson, Sheldon Director George Neubert and Curator Daphne Deeds, and museum staff and steady supporters including Nancy Dawson, Lonnie Pierson Dunbier, Karen Janovy, Janice Roberts, and Rhonda Seacrest all helped to guide and shape it. The program has also benefited from the direction of Sharon Kennedy, Susan Soriente, and Sarah Feit. Initial financial support for Sheldon Statewide was provided by the Sheldon Art Association and was renewed in 1992 by UNL Chancellor Graham Spanier. Today, Lonnie Pierson Dunbier, Rhonda and James Seacrest, Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of Nebraska, the Nebraska Arts Council, Nebraska Cultural Endowment, and the Sheldon Art Association support the project. Sheldon Statewide remains a key embodiment of the museum's mission as part of a land-grant institution that is committed "to fostering collaborations within the University and among our constituents in the community, Nebraska, and the nation."

Commemorations: Art From Sheldon's Permanent Collection

SARAH FEIT, Curatorial Assistant

This year's Sheldon Statewide examines commemoration as a theme in art—what brings people together, gives them a sense of identity, and how our perception of commemoration changes over time. Today, for example, Doris Lee's *Thanksgiving* (fig. 1) seems an endearing and whimsical depiction of a favorite American holiday: a scene of domesticity and tradition in which women and children prepare for the annual family feast in a bustling kitchen. However, the painting actually sparked a firestorm of criticism upon its debut in the 1930s.

The controversy surrounding the painting occurred when it was awarded the prestigious Mr. and Mrs. Frank Logan Medal at the Art Institute of Chicago's 1935 exhibition of contemporary American painting. The Logans, wealthy donors to the museum and namesakes of the award, were dismayed by the exhibition jury's choice. Quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* as calling Lee's work "atrocious," Josephine Hancock Logan in particular spoke out against the painting. As a result of her censure of Lee and the publicity that resulted, Logan started an organization

Figure 1. Doris Lee. *Thanksgiving*, 1942. Lithograph. NAA–Jean Rathburn Faulkner Memorial, N-736.

called Sanity in Art, whose goal was to rid institutions of what she referred to as modernist "grotesqueries."[1]

Contemporary viewers may have trouble understanding Logan's discomfort with *Thanksgiving*. Rather than pushing artistic boundaries, today the work seems like a sentimental depiction of a revered holiday. Despite Logan's objection to its style, Lee's Depression-era image focuses on American ideals rather than the changes that were occurring at the time. The work was nostalgic even when it was first painted, and it was popular due in part to its ability to soothe an American psyche that was rattled by the Great Depression and World War II, events that saw traditional gender roles redefined as women left the home and entered the workforce to support their families and join the war effort. The painting's appeal is evidenced by the fact that in 1942, seven years after its completion, Lee created an original lithograph of the same subject for the Association of American Artists.[2]

Thanksgiving reminds us that the meaning of a work of art—and the public's perception of it—can change over time. Moreover, the history of that artwork's reception provides an introduction

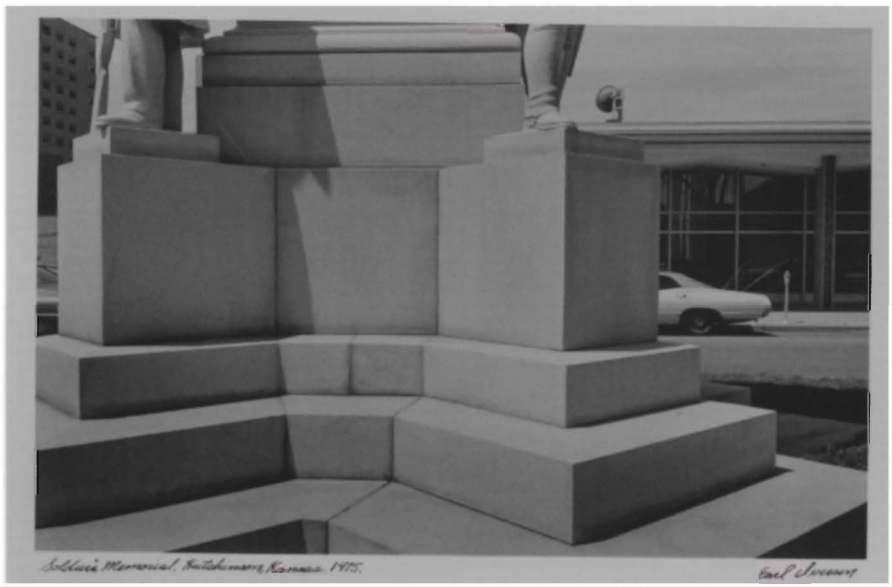


Figure 2. Earl Iversen. *Soldier's Memorial, Hutchinson, Kansas*, 1975. Gelatin silver print. UNL–Gift of James and Roxanne Enyeart, U-4101.

to the topic of this year's Sheldon Statewide: commemoration. By definition, commemoration is something that is intended to honor an important event or person from the past. French sociologist Émile Durkheim proposed that a society's traditional beliefs are upheld through the renewal of what he called *sentiment* and *unity*.[3] In the case of *Thanksgiving*, sentiment and unity can be interpreted as a sense of continuity with the past and tradition.

Durkheim's approach assumes that each event, idea, or person being remembered possesses or produces a shared narrative or sentiment. However, commemoration does not always guarantee consensus, and it rarely remains fixed in its meanings. The views of a dominant group may overshadow the differing voices of others; commonly held beliefs and assumptions may change over time; and artworks that were initially created to document eventually may become commemorative in function.

Even national ideals of commemoration can change. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Congressman Nathaniel Macon declared that monuments were "good for nothing."[4] Like other political leaders, he believed that fostering education and literacy were better methods of honoring the past than a "heap of dead stones."[5] However, by the end of the Civil War, commemorative works were cropping up across the country as communities sought to honor their war heroes quickly and affordably. This proliferation of monuments resulted in an outcry over their lack of artistic quality.[6]

While early suspicion about honorifics and memorials did not last, over the past two centuries, continual shifts have occurred in America's commemorative landscape, and these changes have been both physical and ideological. Whereas large-scale war monuments have traditionally exuded heroic timelessness, more recent artists have emphasized impermanence, introspection, and the costs of war. For example, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., has sometimes been called an "antimonument" because it lacks any obvious didactic message. Instead, Lin hoped her work would engage visitors in private acts of remembrance.[7]

These altered views of commemoration are illustrated in Earl Iversen's 1975 photograph of a twentieth-century Civil War monument in Hutchinson, Kansas (fig. 2). The neoclassical Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Monument was completed in 1918 and donated by the Grand Army of the Republic, a national organization of Union Civil War veterans. The monument features a figure of President Abraham Lincoln on a pedestal flanked at the base by three Union soldiers, one sailor, and two Confederate cannons.[8] Sculptural programs of this type were characteristic of nineteenth- and early twentieth-

Figure 3. Larry Burrows. *Ammunition Airlift into Besieged Khesanh (Vietnam War)*, 1968. Dye transfer photo print. UNL–F.M. Hall Collection, H-2749.

century public monuments to the Civil War, which often avoided any visual references to suffering or death in favor of polite, easily recognizable figures and motifs. Such monuments were meant to promote unity and a shared sense of history rather than focus on the large-scale suffering wrought by the conflict. Iversen's photograph of the monument, meanwhile, seems to offer a critique of such a message. By capturing only the sculpture's base, the artist effectively cuts off—and thus questions—any symbolic meaning viewers may gain from the figures. The ambiguous nature of this photograph may suggest Iversen's discomfort with the simplified narrative of the original monument.

While Iversen's image reveals changes in how commemorative works are made and understood, the work of Larry Burrows points to another problematic aspect of commemoration: how we memorialize an event around which there is no national consensus. For example, attempts to honor and observe the Vietnam War have been complicated by disagreements over the United States' intervention and political conflicts on the one hand, and the desired wishes of soldiers and their families for remembrance on the other. As the art historian Kirk Savage points out, the act of commemoration has a dual quality: honoring one group of people can lead to the inadvertent silencing of another.[9]

Burrows photographed the Vietnam War for *Time* and *US News*. Unlike commemorative memorials created after an event, his pictures were taken during the height of the crisis; in fact, he was later killed while on assignment. In a single image (fig. 3), Burrows captured the mechanisms of war: soldiers and machinery, the landscape and its people. While the work was initially meant to document, we can understand it today as serving a commemorative function by reminding viewers of the lived experiences of those during wartime. Because the image was taken in the midst of the conflict, it provides a nuanced remembrance of events that does not deny the experience of the Vietnamese.

While how and what we honor of the past can be contested, the location of monuments or the space of commemoration is also significant and, when examined within a museum context, can be especially problematic. Historian Amanda Cobb, for example, implicates museums in dictating the public's popular understanding of Native Americans. "By using a historically unquestioned authority to take Native objects and remains and to define who and what Native Americans are," she writes, "museums have, in many ways, trapped Native Americans behind their glassed-in cases, rendering vital, contemporary Native voices silent."[10] While Cobb's criticism is directed at ethnographic objects, the silencing she mentions raises the point that commemorative activities can perpetuate stereotypes.

Figure 4. Lynne Allen. *Pouch*, 2007. Mixed media. UNL–Gift of the Under Presure Print Club, U-5494.

In her art, Lynne Allen also challenges the museum's role as cultural interpreter. *Pouch* (fig. 4) contradicts many characteristics of traditional commemorative works: it is small, fragile, and created out of paper. Allen interrupts the typical association of commemoration with masculinity, monumentality, and permanence by using sewing, which is typically linked with female craft. She writes, "My work has always been about inequity in society, the fact that there is always an 'under dog.' There is danger, there are lies, and there are forgotten truths."[11] Recalling Savage's suggestion that commemorative art can privilege the telling of one story at the expense of another, her work inserts another narrative that counters the established story of Western conquest. In addition, *Pouch* offers the artist a means for defining her own experiences in relation to her ancestral home, South Dakota's Standing Rock Indian Reservation.

Even the commemoration of well-known public figures can be difficult. Such was the case with Martin Luther King, Jr. Ben Shahn's 1965 portrait of the Civil Rights leader (fig. 5) depicts King in action, with his mouth open as if in the middle of a speech. The image originally appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, where it introduced a story about the Civil Rights struggle in Selma, Alabama. The print was later republished as part of a portfolio of works to benefit the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee of the American Civil Liberties Union. While King is a symbolic figure today, during his lifetime he was

often controversial, and his contested place in history was brought to light when supporters fought to create a national holiday in his honor. Fifteen years after King's death in 1968, the government created Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Many states were slow to respond to the new holiday, however; some refused to make it a paid holiday, and others instead declared a Civil Rights Day without mentioning King specifically.[12]

In a larger context, the contention that surrounded the creation of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day can be understood as a struggle to write and define the legacy of a public figure and the history of the Civil Rights movement in America. It demonstrates that commemoration often does not come easily. It is malleable and open to challenge, controversy, and dissent. Discussing and questioning commemorative practices and artworks allows us to assess the past more sharply and opens up new understandings of the present.

Figure 5. Ben Shahn. *Martin Luther King*, 1965. Wood engraving. NAA–Gift of Jack Campbell, N-253. Art © Estate of Ben Shahn/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

1. Judith A. Barter and Brandon K. Ruud, "Freedom of the Brush: American Modernism at the Art Institute of Chicago," in Judith A. Barter et al., American Modernism at the Art Institute of Chicago: From World War I to 1955 (Chicago and New Haven: Art Institute of Chicago/Yale University Press): 18–20; see also Sarah E. Kelly in ibid., 183–85.
2. Ibid., 19.
3. Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, "The Vietnamese Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past," American Journal of Sociology 97, 2, (Sept. 1991): 379.
4. Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars* (University of California Press, 2009): 1.
5. Ibid, 1.
6. Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer, "Fine Arts," *Independent* (Aug. 4, 1887), in Sarah Burns and John Davis, *American Art to 1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009): 906–07.
7. Savage (note 4): 267–70.
8. The monument is on the National Register of Historic Places, and its application is available at: www.kshs.org/resource/national.../Reno_SoldiersandSailorsMemorialNR.pdf.
9. Savage (note 4): 291–92.
10. Amanda J. Cobb, "The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty," *American Quarterly* 57, 2 (June 2005): 488.
11. Lynn Allen, artist statement, curatorial files, Sheldon Museum of Art.
12. Matthew Dennis, *We Are What We Celebrate* (New York University Press, 2004): 181–82.

Exhibition Checklist

James Alinder
(American, born 1941)
Mt. Rushmore, Black Hills, South Dakota, 1971
Gelatin silver print
20.8 x 45.4 cm (3/16 x 17 7/8 in.)
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection, H-1980

Lynne Allen
(American, born 1948)
Pouch, 2007
Mixed media
32.4 x 22.9 x 3.2 cm (12 3/4 x 9 x 1 1/4 in.)
UNL–Gift of the Under Pressure Print Club, U-5494

Carlos Anderson
(American, 1905–1978)
Man and His Monument, 1941
Lithograph
38.1 x 27.9 cm (15 x 11 in.)
UNL–Allocation of the U.S. Government, Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration, WPA-327

Larry Burrows
(British, 1926–1971)
Ammunition Airlift into Besieged Khesanh (Vietnam War), 1968
Dye transfer photo print
29.7 x 44.9 cm (11 11/16 x 17 11/16 in.)
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection, H-2749

Glenn O. Coleman
(American, 1887–1932)
Washington Square, undated
Oil on panel
31.3 x 34.1 cm (12 5/16 x 13 7/16 in.)
NAA–Thomas C. Woods Memorial, N-224

William Copley
(American, 1919–1996)
Untitled, 1968
Silkscreen
66 x 53.3 cm (26 x 21 in.)
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection, H-1466.8

Don Doll
(American, born 1937)
Freddy Walking Eagle with Harvey's Bronze Star,1975
Gelatin silver print
20.3 x 30.5 cm (8 x 12 in.)
UNL–Gift of Mid-America Arts Alliance, U-1986

Margo Humphrey
(American, born 1942)
Louisiana, LOUISIANA!, 2006
Color reduction woodcut
50.8 x 66 cm (20 x 26 in.)
UNL–Gift of the artist and the Under Pressure Print Club, U-5484

Earl Iversen
(American, born 1943)
Soldier's Memorial, Hutchinson, Kansas, 1975
Gelatin silver print
20.3 x 25.4 cm (8 x 10 in.)
UNL–Gift of James and Roxanne Enyeart, U-4101

Kenneth J. Jarecke
(American, born 1963)
Untitled (American Soldier) (Gulf War), 1991
Gelatin silver print
40.5 x 50.8 cm (15 15/16 x 20 in.)
UNL–Gift of the artist, U-4381

Herbert Johnson
(American, 1878–1946)
Mr. Voter, Your Wife Wants You, 1915
Ink on paper
41.3 x 55.3 cm (16 1/4 x 21 3/4 in.)
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection, H-131

John Kane
(American, born Scotland, 1860–1934)
Fourth of July Parade, 1930
Oil on canvas
43.2 x 35.6 cm (17 x 14 in.)
NAA–Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial, N-271

Doris Lee
(American, 1905–1983)
Thanksgiving, 1942
Lithograph
22.5 x 30.2 cm (8 7/8 x 11 7/8 in.)
NAA–Jean Rathburn Faulkner Memorial, N-736

Vik Muniz
(American, born Brazil, 1961)
Lincoln After Brady (from *Pictures of Ink*), 2000
Cibachrome color print
101.6 x 76.2 cm (40 x 30 in.)
UNL–Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Goldberg by exchange, U-5121
Art © Vik Muniz/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Lowell Nesbitt
(American, 1933–1993)
Untitled, Impression Left by Lunar Module
(from the *Moon Shot Series*), 1969
55.9 x 75.9 cm (22 x 29 7/8 in.)
Lithograph
UNL–Gift of Reese Palley and Marilyn Arnold Palley, U-4460.7

Lowell Nesbitt
Untitled, Imprint of Footstep on Lunar Surface (from the *Moon Shot Series*), 1969
55.9 x 75.9 cm (22 x 29 7/8 in.)
Lithograph
UNL–Gift of Reese Palley and Marilyn Arnold Palley, U-4460.8

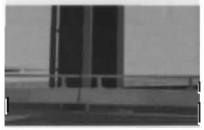
Claes Oldenburg
(American, born Sweden 1929)
Vote, 1984
Three-color serigraph
52.7 x 40.6 cm (20 3/4 x 16 in.)
UNL–Gift of Lawrence Reger, U-3717

Charles Whedon Rain
(American, 1911–1985)
Imperial Dusk, 1966
Oil on panel
38.1 x 61.0 cm (15 x 24 in.)
UNL–Bequest of the artist, U-3811

Robert Rauschenberg
(American, 1925–2008)
Untitled (Statue of Liberty), 1983
Lithograph
89.9 x 61.3 cm (35 3/8 x 24 1/8 in.)
UNL–F. M. Hall Collection, H-2945. Art © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Ben Shahn
(American, born Lithuania, 1898–1969)
Martin Luther King, 1965
Wood engraving
47.6 x 38.4 cm (18 3/4 x 15 1/8 in.)
NAA–Gift of Jack Campbell, N-253
Art © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

David Francis Sullivan
(American, born 1941)
Monument, undated
Serigraph
50.8 x 76.2 cm (20 x 30 in.)
UNL–Thomas P. Coleman Memorial, U-2727



2011–12 EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

commemorations

AUGUST 25–SEPTEMBER 26, 2011
Chadron State College, Chadron, NE
Sponsor: Chadron State College

SEPTEMBER 28–OCTOBER 27, 2011
McKinley Education Center, North Platte, NE
Sponsor: NebraskaLand National Bank
Mike Jacobson, President & CEO

OCTOBER 29–NOVEMBER 27, 2011
Museum of the High Plains, McCook, NE
Sponsor: McCook Arts Council

JANUARY 9–FEBRUARY 1, 2012
Concordia University, Marxhausen Gallery of Art, Seward, NE
Sponsor: Concordia University

FEBRUARY 3–MARCH 5, 2012
Columbus Art Gallery, Columbus, NE
Sponsor: Robert and Linda Labenz, Columbus Bank and Trust

MARCH 7–APRIL 5, 2012
Cornerstone Bank, York, NE
Sponsor: Cornerstone Bank

APRIL 6–MAY 7, 2012
Library & Arts Center, Stalder Gallery, Falls City, NE
Sponsor: Richardson County Arts & Humanities Council

MAY 10–JUNE 11, 2012
West Nebraska Arts Center, Scottsbluff, NE

Dates are subject to slight modification.

Commemorations: Art from Sheldon's Permanent Collection is an exhibition of Sheldon Statewide, an outreach program of the Sheldon Museum of Art, Sheldon Art Association, and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. This exhibition is made possible by the generous support of Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of Nebraska, the Nebraska Arts Council, the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, James and Rhonda Seacrest, and Lonnie Pierson Dunbier.

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