

Danielle Rice

Rocky Too

The Saga of an Outdoor Sculpture



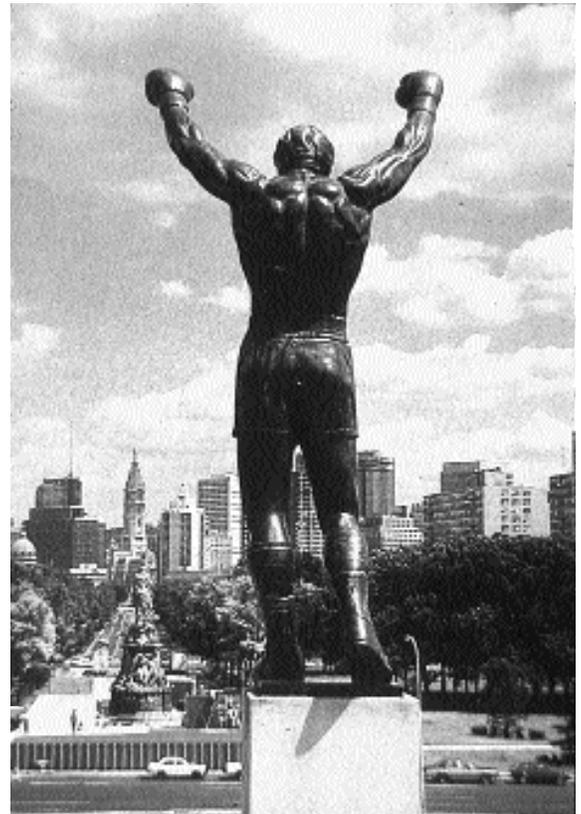
For the filming of *Rocky III* in 1982, United Artists film studios installed a bronze statue of Rocky Balboa, the boxer created and portrayed by Sylvester Stallone, at the top of the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Stallone then donated the film prop, modeled by sculptor Thomas Schomberg, to the city of Philadelphia. The actor assumed that the statue would remain in its prominent and strategically significant position, overlooking the grand Benjamin Franklin Parkway, on axis with a monument to George Washington and the statue of William Penn located atop City Hall. But after much controversy concerning its ultimate disposition, the statue was removed—at the Museum’s expense—to the Spectrum, a sports arena and concert venue in South Philadelphia.

Thomas Schomberg, Rocky, 1982, bronze. View from the Philadelphia Museum of Art down the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, 1982.

Seven years later, United Artists once again requested permission to reposition the statue on the art museum steps for the filming of *Rocky V*. This time, museum authorities negotiated to have the film studio remove the statue at the studio’s expense immediately after the shooting. But Sylvester Stallone held a press conference and reopened the debate regarding the proper home for the Rocky statue, claiming that he, Stallone, had single-handedly done more for Philadelphia than Benjamin Franklin. The media eagerly picked up the ball, accusing museum authorities of snobbism and casting the controversy in the predictable terms of elite culture vs. popular culture.

Although created largely out of the delight that the media seems to derive from such issues, the controversy over the Rocky statue does raise real questions about the nature of the monument in contemporary society. What should a monument of our time look like? Who gets to decide? Is an authentic artifact of a fictional hero the perfect answer? Could the Rocky monument have been transformed from self-aggrandizement and pop cult worship to a form of public art able to engage people seriously in questioning modes of authority?

It could perhaps be argued that the Rocky movies themselves constitute a popular monument more pervasive and more appropriate to today’s culture than any sculpture or other form of art. The



theme of the Rocky films is the wish-fulfillment fantasy of the hometown boy who achieves success through perseverance and hard work, but maintains his humility despite a number of challenges and temptations. Rocky’s rigorous training includes a symbolic run from his home in the bowels of South Philadelphia, a largely working-class neighborhood, down the imposing Benjamin Franklin Parkway to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The run climaxes at the top of the museum steps, that ultimate monument to ascendant, owning-class culture. The message of the working-class boy triumphing over the authority of the elite is thinly veiled, although it is never explicit in the movies.

During its brief moment at the top of the museum steps, the Rocky statue was acknowledged by city officials to be the second largest tourist attraction in the city after the Liberty Bell. The Liberty Bell and the Rocky monument are not as dramatically different as they may at first appear.

Both are symbols of liberty: the Liberty Bell of political freedom, and the Rocky statue of the opportunity to achieve individual success and wealth through hard work and tenacity.

Rocky is ideally suited to reinforcing the mythic vision of liberty as free enterprise, and thus it molds itself perfectly to the American dream. During the Reagan era, this ideal of self-fulfillment through hard work took on heroic proportions and became the prime justification for the free-market economic system that shaped the policies of the Reagan administration. Reagan, himself a movie star, had achieved the ultimate symbol of national success, the presidency of the United States. The discourse of the Rocky movies is entirely consistent with the myths of the Reagan years. Like Reagan, Rocky is a small-town boy who makes good. And if a movie star can become president, why not a monument to a fictional hero who, as the real-life mayor of Philadelphia at the time Wilson Goode argued, "represents the struggle of so many people" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 22, 1990).

The popularity of the Rocky movies, and their perfect fit with the ethos of the day, combined to give the debate over the placement of the Rocky statue the flavor of political controversy. But whereas in 1982 the controversy over the statue was cast primarily in terms of popular vs. elite culture, in 1989 the public brouhaha was all the more poignant. It was now seen against the backdrop of the conservative backlash against the arts brought on by the censorship of the Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano exhibitions. The aggressive actions of conservative politicians such as Senator Jesse Helms, actively seeking to curtail government funding for the arts by limiting the powers of the National Endowment for the Arts, also fueled a public outcry against the perceived esoteric nature of much contemporary art. Although Helms and his supporters supposedly attacked obscenity in art, all challenging art became suspect.

The timing of the Rocky controversy coincided with an upsurge of hostility toward the authority of the art world, symbolized by the imposing structure of the museum. Rocky atop the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art represented a victory for the disenfranchised outsiders of the art world over their snooty and elitist cousins. Hostility toward the hegemony of art world practices easily translates into a hostility toward oppressive authority in general, thus the self-righteous tone of many of the newspaper articles on the Rocky controversy.

Public art, specifically the contemporary practice of installing works of art in urban spaces, usually through a process that combines judging by art world "experts" with consensus-building among bureaucrats and city dwellers, has traditionally provided a forum for the airing of conflicting opinions

Editorial (right) reprinted courtesy of Rick Nichols, Editorial Board, The Philadelphia Inquirer.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

An Independent Newspaper

Fulgencio Falt
General Manager and Executive Vice President

Eugene L. Roberts Jr.
Executive Editor and President

David H. Bolds
Editor of the Editorial Page

Sunday, February 17, 1990

Page 8

EDITORIALS

Rocky in bronze

That statue is beginning to grow on us; we just wish it didn't seem so small

Sometime after the first of the year, Rocky Balboa — the bronzed one — reappeared atop the Art Museum steps, proving that, well, Mike Tyson and "Haise" Douglas aren't the only boxers capable of acting as logos to wagging in this town. Of course, Rocky has been there before, posing nicely in 1982 as a prop in Rocky III. Then they hauled him off to South Philadelphia and a not-so-fatal resting place outside that temple of Jockdom, the Spectrum. He'd never have left gymside, but for the call of another movie.

Still, now that he's back up on the steps (and scheduled to be there another week), it's going to be hard to say goodbye. And not just, we point out, for Vincent Furno, the state senator from Rocky's old jogging ground. The canny Mr. Furno fired off a resolution last week urging Mr. Balboa's retention outside the museum as "a symbol of the spirit of Philadelphia" and the hopes of the common man. He is not alone. We're feeling a twinge ourselves.

We dropped by to see Rocky the other day and our first reaction was this: He doesn't exactly fit the space. From Eakins Oval, the roadway below, the palooka looks like an Incredible Hulk toy that some kid lost up there on the tundra. Go look yourself. He's a shrimp against the museum's Grecian facade. Swallowed up. Weenie-sized.

They could, we suppose, cart him down to the foot of the steps. But, as museum president Robert Montgomery Scott himself opines, triumphal poses lose something at the foot of steps. So, that's not quite right either. (We'll concede that not everyone shares our siting concerns. There are no shortage of Philadelphians who would dismiss the question of scale and say, "That's where he belongs!")

One-boy. It's a hard one. Joyce Melvick of Haddonfield was staring at the 2,000-pound hunk the other day. She wanted to send him back to the Spectrum "with the other jocks." Susan Kollogg of American Trolley Tours preferred the city's visitors' center at JFK Plaza. Willie Jordan, a systems analyst for the Air Force, said keep him right there: "It's marvelous sculpture," he said. "And after all, it is a museum of art."

We're not going to be drawn into what's marvelous sculpture or not. A nice woman at the museum's information desk, however, did point out that Rocky was somewhat out of proportion, heavy of thigh and long of foot. And, by golly, he fit, on close inspection. But then looking too closely at the statuary outside the museum can get unsettling all

around. Just down the steps facing City Hall is the Washington Monument, a 19th century effort, testosterone with moose, Indian maidens, dead or moribund fish, alligators, thoroughbred cattle, etc., all topped off by a round-ed Gen. Washington, whose rear end and that of his steed, though presumably unintentionally, are aimed squarely at Mr. Balboa. That's not getting into other statues in the vicinity, like the one of mountain lion tearing the neck flesh of an Indian pony and such gory stuff.

On the matter of gory stuff, we'll just mention in passing that behind Rocky and only a few feet from the museum's main entry, the Jacques-Lipchitz interpretation of Prometheus Strangling the Vulture isn't for the faint of heart. The verb in the title says it all. There are other assorted works up there on the tundra, some shoved off to one side on wooden pallets, apparently transients like Mr. Balboa himself. One, we noticed, is of two boxers locked in what appears to be an eternal granitic clutch.

They'll never attract the admirers that Rocky does. Kids from Allen-



Photo by Rick Nichols

Kids from Washington, D.C. Grandmothers from Israel! Their fists ball up, the arms stretch skyward. Climb. Rocky's more than a symbol for Philadelphians. He's an international photo opportunity. And, Lord knows, the Liberty Bell shouldn't be the only show in town.

Oh, some people get technical. They say if this is where Rocky ran, he should be wearing a sweat-soaked. Or they say he's not commemorating a real event, or a significant event (though they don't go on to explain the significance of a limo tearing neck flesh). They say his apparel is limited. "It would be like pulling a statue of a sewing machine out there," said the info woman. "Maybe the garment workers would like it...."

But they don't get it, do they? They don't get that Rocky is significant: that any guy who can start by working out on sides of beef in this town, win fame and fortune and still hold on to his roots is significant. They don't get the meaning of a legend — or of a Pop Icon, the thrill of having a culturally beamed and frozen, ever-ready to oblige the family shunning. They don't understand about underdogs and guts and glory. They don't, in a word, get Philadelphia.

Smile us, if you must, you art purists. But if Rocky Balboa didn't seem so shrunken and lost at the top of those steps, so alone, and so diminished, by God, we'd be tempted to say right along with Sen. Furno: Give the guy a longer count.



Thomas Schomberg, *Rocky*, 1982 bronze. View of the statue atop the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photo by the author, 1990.

about the nature and role of art. The controversy over the Rocky statue highlights the failure of communication between the practitioners and experts of the art world and the diverse inhabitants of urban environments. But it also reveals the active—and to a great degree unstudied—role of the media in mythicizing and representing so-called public opinion. It is not coincidental that this media-created controversy ensued in this particular political climate at this particular moment. Under the banner celebrating mass culture over elite

had begun by arguing in favor of removing the statue from the museum steps because it was not a real work of art but merely a movie prop. But they soon abandoned this line of argument because of the difficulty of coming up with a clear-cut definition of art that could exclude the statue. Stallone's lawyers, who had begun by arguing the legitimacy of the sculpture as art, did a sudden about-face when they discovered that the Philadelphia Art Commission, and not the museum, is ultimately responsible for the disposition of public art in the City of Philadelphia. In claiming that the statue was not art, Stallone's lawyers hoped to keep the decision as to its ultimate disposition out of the hands of the Art Commission and in the hands of city officials eager to capitalize on the statue's popularity with tourists. In the end, the Art Commission considered a number of possible sites for the statue. However, because the piece had already been removed to the Spectrum, and substantial funds were required for the transfer of the 1,500-pound bronze, the Rocky monument remains at the sports arena. As a concession to tourism, the city installed a concrete plate with "Rocky's footprints" at the top of the museum steps, in the place previously occupied by the much-debated monument.

culture, strong individuals tried to bypass well-established, democratic review procedures either for reasons of personal aggrandizement, as in Stallone's case, or for political ones, as in the case of Senator Helms.

Like the Reagan era itself, the Rocky controversy ended with a whimper rather than a bang. To fend off the media attack, museum spokespeople

Danielle Rice is Curator of Education at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She has published a number of articles in Museum News and The Journal of Aesthetic Education on the plight of the public in the museum setting.

Cartoon courtesy of Tony Auth, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

