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Central Park Needs More Women

BY MADISON MARLOW/ON APRIL 13, 2022



Photo by Madison Marlow

On August 26th, 2020, the non-profit organization Monumental Women unveiled the first statue of women in Central Park, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment.¹ The Women's Rights Pioneers Monument features Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony.² Prior to the placement of the Women's Monument, Central Park was home to two dozen statues of men and fictional or mythical women characters.³ The fourteen-foot bronze Women's Monument, created by artist Meredith Bergman, stands tall at the south end of the park.⁴ The three historical figures – all having lived in New York, visited Central Park, and worked together during the women's suffrage movement⁵ – are depicted conversing around a table.⁶ For women and girls who walk past the statue, the valiant women symbolize hope and progress. At its unveiling, Bergman remarked, "This sculpture is breaking the bronze ceiling."⁷ The process to place it in the park took seven

years, more than \$1 million in private funding, and constant push back along the way.⁸ Why did it take so long for Central Park to have a statue commemorating women, and why aren't there more monuments of women in the park?

To understand the existence of statues in Central Park, it is necessary to consider the park's history. Construction of Central Park began in the mid-1800s.⁹ Statues were not part of its original design,¹⁰ and were considered by the park's creators as inconsistent with the mission to provide green space for New Yorkers.¹¹ In 1870, a new city charter transferred the control of New York City's government from the state to a new city administration, the Department of Public Parks.¹² The new administrators of the park recognized the public's desire for monuments to commemorate heroes of the Civil War.¹³ To prohibit monuments from overwhelming the landscape, the Parks Department decided that "[a] limited number of [] choice works of art may be introduced, if caution and good judgment [are] used for placing them."¹⁴ The city instituted rules on monuments, which provided "that every statue shall have the judgment, as to its merit as a work of art" from museum and design institution leaders.¹⁵ Additionally, statues shall be placed only along the Mall and near the entrances, sculptured works of art of dramatic or poetic interest being allowed at other points where they will not interfere with the views on the Park, and . . . no statue commemorative of any person shall be accepted until after a period of five years from the death of such person.¹⁶

From Central Park's inception, the city's stance was clear: public art in the park should be limited and not detract from nature. In 1873, the first statue appeared, an angelic figure atop Bethesda Fountain, created by American sculptor Emma Stebbins.¹⁷ Twenty-five years later, the appeal for art in the park led to the formation of the New York City's Art Commission in 1898, now known as the Public Design Commission.¹⁸ The design review agency has jurisdiction over permanent structures, landscape architecture, and art proposed on city-owned property.¹⁹

By the twentieth century, the park deteriorated due to increased use of its landscape and facilities.²⁰ Robert Moses became Park Commissioner in the 1930s, with a mission to upgrade and modernize the park.²¹ During his time as Commissioner, NYC Parks Department accepted donations of a handful of statues.²² By the time of Moses' retirement in 1960, public interest in monuments had declined, and the park fell further into a state of deterioration.²³ To address its decline, the city's Landmark Preservation Commission named Central Park a scenic landmark in 1973, in addition to its newfound title as a National Historic Landmark.²⁴ Thus began a formalized movement to preserve and restore the park,²⁵ but the city was not alone in its efforts. A group of private citizens founded what is today known as the Central Park Conservancy, a private non-profit focused on restoration and maintenance of the park.²⁶

To preserve the park's natural landscape, the Conservancy and the city had an unwritten moratorium on sculptures.²⁷ Although there were numerous public art exhibitions throughout the years,²⁸ the Women's Monument is Central Park's first new monument since 1965.²⁹

Monumental Women spent seven years seeking approval for the monument.³⁰ The process was drawn out in part due to the controversies surrounding the statue's design.³¹ Initially, Anthony and Stanton were the only figures depicted, but it was "criticized for placing only white women on the pedestal—essentially continuing the erasure of Black women's contributions to the suffrage movement."³² Monumental Women and artist Bergan shifted gears to include the third figure, Sojourner Truth, the African-American abolitionist and suffragist.³³ In addition to finalizing the design, the major battle was navigating the approval process from the public-private entities overseeing the park.

Pam Elam, President of Monumental Women, said that the process "was not easy. It started with the parks department, then it went to the Central Park Conservancy, then the Public Design Commission, then the Landmarks Preservation Commission and all the community boards that surround Central Park. It shouldn't have been so hard."³⁴ Due to its history, the Parks Department has a general presumption against adding new structures and features to the park.³⁵ The city eventually agreed to put "real women" in the park, even though that meant altering the park for the first time since it received landmark status.³⁶ However, even with its landmark status, the New York Administrative Code provides broad discretion to Landmarks Preservation Commissioners.³⁷ For instance, when the Commission receives an application for a permit to alter a historic district, the Commission shall consider, among other factors, "the proposed work in creating, changing, destroying or affecting the exterior architectural features," and "factors of aesthetic, historical and architectural values and significance, architectural style, design."³⁸ The Monument's location was carefully selected to preserve the park's overall architectural features and comply with the Landmarks Preservation's considerations.³⁹ The location proposed for the Monument on Literary Walk in Central Park mirrors the Fitz-Greene Halleck statue and completes the symmetry of other statues along the walk.⁴⁰ If anything, the addition of the Monument compliments Literary Walk's progression of statues, rather than detracts from it.

The Public Design Commission also has great discretion under the New York City Charter.⁴¹ The charter provides, "[n]o work of art shall hereafter become the property of the city by gift or otherwise . . . [unless] the commission deems it necessary or desirable."⁴² The Public Design Commission's purview is only supposed to extend to a statue's aesthetic quality, cost estimate, and proposed location.⁴³ And yet, the Public Design Commission continued to push back throughout the approval process, testing the limits of its authority.⁴⁴ The Commission asked for extensive input of Community Boards and historians, all of whom enthusiastically approved of the statue.⁴⁵

While Monumental Women did not need explicit approval from the Central Park Conservancy for the statue, it did have to account for the Conservancy's role in managing the park.⁴⁶ The Conservancy operates under a contract with the Parks Department.⁴⁷ Its responsibility for monuments includes maintenance and care.⁴⁸ The Conservancy worked closely with the Parks Department and Monumental Women to secure the location of the monument.⁴⁹ Additionally,

it worked with Monumental Women to create a maintenance and preservation plan for the statue in the years to come.⁵⁰ The collaborative work between Monumental Women, Central Park Conservancy, and the Parks Department is emblematic of how Central Park operates and relies on funding from private-public partnerships.⁵¹ The Women’s Monument exemplifies that cooperation between private-public entities is a reality and should necessitate the addition of women statues to Central Park.

It often takes years for an artist to create a monument, in addition to hundreds of thousands of dollars in funding. The Women’s Monument, however, paved a new path for women in Central Park. The Parks Department has lifted the years-long moratorium for sculptures in park, and private-public partners managing the park can use their statutory authority to accept proposals for more statues of real women. Public art in New York must reflect the city’s diverse residents, including women.⁵²

The entities overseeing Central Park, with their broad discretionary powers, can no longer hide behind the law to say that there’s a general presumption against adding new structures and features to the park. The presumption was never an issue when adding over twenty-two statues of men. If there is concern about overwhelming the park’s landscape with additional statues, there is another answer. During a hearing at City Hall, one member of the Public Design Commission proposed a solution: “There are what, five or six [male] statues that I think could easily be replaced by individual statues of each of these women.”⁵³ Perhaps it will take another group of women leaders – like those who installed the Women’s Monument—to see it through.

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1. Monumental Women, Monumental Women, <https://monumentalwomen.org> [<https://perma.cc/AR9S-GVL6>] (last visited Mar. 27, 2022).
2. Id.
3. See Alisha Haridasani Gupta, For Three Suffragists, A Monument Well Past Due, N.Y. Times (Aug. 6, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/arts/design/suffragist-19th-amendment-central-park.html> [<https://perma.cc/LU3D-W8ZM>]. The statues of “women” included depictions of Alice in Wonderland, Juliet from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, and Mother Goose. Id. According to the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Art Inventories Catalog, of the 5,193 public outdoor sculptures of individuals in the U.S., only eight percent are women. Cari Shane, Why the Dearth of Statues Honoring Women in Statuary Hall and Elsewhere?, Wash. Post (Apr. 15, 2011),

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/why-the-dearth-of-statues-honoring-women-in-statuary-hall-and-elsewhere/2011/04/11/AFx8lgjD_story.html?utm_term=.b5fe30015674
[<https://perma.cc/EP6B-925U>].

4. See Gupta, *supra* note 3.
5. See, e.g., Debra Michals, Sojourner Truth, Nat'l Women's Hist. Museum (2015), <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/sojourner-truth> [<https://perma.cc/YJ8M-MX22>]. It is important to note that while the three women worked together for a brief period, Truth parted ways with Stanton and Anthony due to a divide in the women's suffrage movement. See Midge Wilson & Kathy Russell, *Black Women & The Suffrage Movement: 1848-1923*, Wesleyan Univ. (1996), <https://www.wesleyan.edu/mlk/posters/suffrage.html> [<https://perma.cc/DW3K-MKJN>]. After the Civil war, white women sought to gain the right to vote, even if meant excluding black men and women from that right. See Brent Staples, *How the Suffrage Movement Betrayed Black Women*, N.Y. Times (July 28, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/opinion/sunday/suffrage-movement-racism-black-women.html> [<https://perma.cc/JJ9Y-7BTX>]. For Truth and other black women, "the central fallacy of the white suffragist push [was] that African-American women could magically separate their blackness from their femaleness." *Id.*
6. See Gupta, *supra* note 3.
7. Nora McGreevy, *Why the First Monument of Real Women in Central Park Matters—and Why It's Controversial*, *Smithsonian Mag.* (Aug. 26, 2020), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/monument-controversy-women-pioneer-central-park-180975662/> [<https://perma.cc/WJM5-RKQD>].
8. See About Monumental Women, *Monumental Women*, <https://monumentalwomen.org/about/> [<https://perma.cc/5MNE-S7VT>] (last visited Mar. 27, 2022).
9. See Marie Warsh, Lane Addonizio, Sara Cedar Miller, Melanie Macchio, Laura Montross, & Sol Salgar, *Central Park: A Research Guide*, Cent. Park Conservancy 26, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.centralparknyc.org/pdfs/institute/Central-Park-Conservancy-Research-Guide.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/K3SL-QSLU>] (last visited Apr. 2, 2022) [hereinafter *Central Park: A Research Guide*].
10. See Marie Warsh, *The Woman Suffrage Monument in Context*, Cent. Park Conservancy (July 26, 2018), <https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/woman-suffrage-monument> [<https://perma.cc/5FFY-R6MJ>].
11. See Tricia Kang, *160 Years of Central Park: A Brief History*, Cent. Park Conservancy (June 1, 2017), <https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/central-park-history> [<https://perma.cc/W64X-MHXW>]. In an annual report from the New York City Department of Public Parks from 1873, the Department stated, "The value of Central Park lies chiefly in the opportunity which it is expected to afford of a quiet rural retreat from the city. . . . Its important elements in this respect are the spaces of open turf

- ground, the trees bordering them, and the subordination of artificial objects to general rural effects in its landscapes.” Third Gen. Parks Dep’t Ann. Rep., at 13 (N.Y. 1872-1873).
12. See Central Park: A Research Guide, *supra* note 9.
 13. See Marie Warsh, A History of Monuments in Central Park, Cent. Park Conservancy (July 26, 2018), <https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/monuments-history#:~:text=Central%20Park’s%20first%20monuments,as%20an%20idealized%20rural%20landscape> [<https://perma.cc/T3ZX-4L55>].
 14. Third Gen. Parks Dep’t Ann. Rep., at 14.
 15. *Id.*
 16. *Id.* at 14-15.
 17. See Warsh, *supra* note 13.
 18. See *id.*
 19. About, NYC Design, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/designcommission/about/about.page> [<https://perma.cc/9GVE-3M46>] (last visited Apr. 2, 2022).
 20. See Central Park: A Research Guide, *supra* note 9, at 27.
 21. See *id.* at 27.
 22. See Warsh, *supra* note 13.
 23. See *id.*
 24. See *id.*
 25. See *id.*
 26. *Id.*
 27. Chadwick Moore, Fighting to Bring Women in History to Central Park, N.Y. Times (July 12, 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/13/nyregion/fighting-to-bring-women-in-history-to-central-park.html> [<https://perma.cc/3DRW-9WMP>].
 28. Warsh, *supra* note 13.
 29. See Sophie Lewis, Central Park Unveils Statue of Women’s Rights Pioneers—Its First Statue of Real-Life Women, CBS News (Aug. 26, 2020, 2:56 PM), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/central-park-unveils-statue-womens-rights-pioneers-equality-day/> [<https://perma.cc/89LS-ZCSJ>].
 30. About Monumental Women, *supra* note 8.
 31. Gupta, *supra* note 3.
 32. *Id.*
 33. *Id.*
 34. *Id.*
 35. See Marie Warsh, Women’s Rights Pioneers: A New Addition to Central Park’s Landscape, Cent. Park Conservancy (Aug. 21, 2020), <https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/womens-rights-pioneers-a-new-addition> [<https://perma.cc/GF86-PH8W>].
 36. See *id.*
 37. See N.Y. Admin. Code tit. 25, § 25-305(b)(1).
 38. N.Y. Admin. Code tit. 25, § 25-305(b)(1).

39. See Sebastian Morries, Plans for Central Park's Women's Rights Monument Returns to the Landmarks Preservation Commission, N.Y. Yimby (Dec. 3, 2019), <https://newyorkyimby.com/2019/12/plans-for-central-parks-womens-rights-monument-returns-to-the-landmarks-preservation-commission.html> [https://perma.cc/V7BS-VAPS].
40. See Application to NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission, Nyc.gov 1, 4 (Dec. 3, 2019), <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/lpc/downloads/pdf/presentation-materials/20191203/Literary-Walk-Central-Park.pdf> [https://perma.cc/PG7G-WBMZ].
41. N.Y. City Charter § 854.
42. N.Y. City Charter § 854.
43. Id.
44. Alejandra O'Connell-Domenech, More Input Needed on Suffragettes Statue: Commission, AMNY (Sept. 18, 2019), <https://www.amny.com/news/more-input-needed-on-suffragettes-statue-commission/> [https://perma.cc/PS5A-9RBW].
45. Id.
46. See Warsh, *supra* note 35.
47. Public-Private Park Partnership (FAQ), Cent. Park Conservancy 1, 2 (2021), https://s3.amazonaws.com/assets.centralparknyc.org/new_images/report/Institute_Private_Public_Partnership_FAQ_2021.pdf [https://perma.cc/8758-L828].
48. See Warsh, *supra* note 35.
49. Id.
50. Zachary Small, As the Mayor Promised Millions for New Monuments, Old Ones Crumbled, N.y. Times (Dec. 29, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/29/arts/design/de-blasio-monuments-memorials-restoration.html> [https://perma.cc/RDA5-QR59].
51. See Public-Private Partnership (FAQ), *supra* note 47.
52. The city has announced plans to add women monuments to Central Park's perimeter. See City Announces New Monument in Central Park Honoring Lyons Family, NYC Cultural Affs. (Oct. 22, 2019), <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dcla/about/pressrelease/PR-2019-10-22-Lyons-Family-Monument-Central-Park.page> [https://perma.cc/ZWR5-8UVQ]; Sculpture by Vinnie Bagwell to Replace Controversial Public Monument in New York's Central Park, Artforum (Oct. 10, 2019), <https://www.artforum.com/news/sculpture-by-vinnie-bagwell-to-replace-controversial-public-monument-in-new-york-s-central-park-81002> [https://perma.cc/L6V2-XJ3D].
53. Julia Marsh, City Commissioner: Replace Male Statues in Central Park With Women, N.Y. Post (Sep. 16, 2019, 8:04 PM), <https://nypost.com/2019/09/16/city-commissioner-replace-male-statues-in-central-park-with-women/> [https://perma.cc/6X9G-5QFJ].