

The Getty Conservation Institute

Save Outdoor Sculpture!: A Community-Based Conservation Program

By Diane L. Mossholder

Every public sculpture has a story to tell—not only the story it was erected to commemorate but also the story of its care or neglect, often a reflection of how the community around it has changed over its life span. In some communities, public sculptures stand as landmarks and gathering places. In others, they are left in forgotten, overgrown corners, waiting to be rediscovered.

Public sculpture is entwined in a community's past, with lessons to teach about history, science, civics, and the visual, performing, and literary arts. Preserving these reminders keeps alive a spirit of community and informs citizens about their communal past. From the Statue of Liberty to a folk art piece in a small town, sculpture can be emblematic of a community's identity.

Unfortunately, outdoor sculptures are vulnerable to deterioration from pollution, lack of maintenance, vandalism, and accidents, and without proper care they eventually deteriorate, taking with them the stories they tell. While the threats cannot be eliminated, regular and appropriate care can mitigate them. But whether a sculpture gets this care depends almost entirely on how the people nearby feel about it—and whether they know it exists at all.

In 1986, Heritage Preservation (then called the National Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Property), based in Washington, DC, conducted the Public Monument Conservation Project, which set out to study publicly accessible outdoor sculptures and monuments that needed care but whose ownership was not always clear. That study led to the creation of Save Outdoor Sculpture! (SOS!), a partnership between Heritage Preservation and the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Save Outdoor Sculpture! was launched in 1989 to document and improve the condition of outdoor sculpture in the United States. Through the survey and subsequent awareness and treatment campaigns, thousands of people of all ages across the United States have rediscovered or learned more about their local sculptures. As a result, many artworks have been saved from their slow slide into decay; many more remain to be rescued.

Rediscovering Outdoor Sculptures

SOS! began its efforts with a nationwide survey. Nonprofit organizations and state agencies were invited to submit proposals to manage a state or metropolitan-area survey. The selected groups designed their own criteria for the surveys; for instance, some included monuments and cemeteries, while others did not.

SOS! developed a survey questionnaire and a volunteer's handbook and tested them during a pilot study in four states in 1991. The program used a train-the-trainers approach, inviting state coordinators to Washington, DC, for hands-on



Leonard Crunelle's [+ Enlarge](#)
1917 bronze sculpture of newspaper publisher George McCullough, in the middle of conservation treatment. The sculpture—located in Muncie, Indiana—was cleaned, repatinated, and coated with protective wax by Venus Bronze Works in 2002 as part of the SOS! initiative. Photo: Venus Bronze Works Inc.

instruction. They returned to their states to teach the rest of the volunteer surveyors.

Eventually, about seven thousand volunteers were recruited and trained, including students, scout troops, veterans groups, civic organizations, local government employees, and entire families. They examined and reported on thirty-two thousand sculptures across the country; their survey forms were deposited into the Inventory of American Sculpture (IAS) at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessible through the SIRIS catalog.

"Creating a truly comprehensive database of America's outdoor sculpture could not have been done without the help of local SOS! coordinating agencies and the thousands of dedicated conservators and volunteers who documented and photographed outdoor sculptures across the country," said Christine Hennessey, Chief of the Research and Scholars Center of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. "We are immensely grateful to all who contributed and continue to contribute their time and expertise to helping us document America's cultural heritage."

The survey information was tested in the SOS! Random Sample in 1996–97, which compared volunteers' reports with opinions of the same sculptures by professional conservators. Of the 107 sculptures in the sample, the two opinions about basic surface condition agreed in 92 cases (86 percent). This sample verified the national survey's statistical conclusion that at least half of the outdoor sculptures in the United States were in need of attention.

"The SOS! survey mobilized people in every state and the District of Columbia to seek out and become invested in their public sculpture," said Susan Nichols, the founding director of SOS! "Once people rediscovered the sculptures in their communities—the history and context—they became advocates for their care and preservation. The survey started a process that led to assessments and conservation treatment."

Public awareness was integral to the survey. Coordinating organizations committed to at least one public awareness activity, with the goal of raising funds to care for sculptures. Some survey groups wore T-shirts and carried tote bags with the SOS! logo while they worked, inspiring questions from passersby. Cleveland SOS! helped its city launch an adopt-a-sculpture program and pass an ordinance requiring new sculpture to include maintenance funding. Other programs produced public service announcements, inspired media coverage of their efforts, held symposia, and even declared "sculpture months"—or sculpture weeks or weekends—with endorsements from mayors or governors.

In November 1996, SOS! held a meeting in Washington, DC, with participants from around the United States who celebrated the program's accomplishments and considered its future. More than two hundred people helped flesh out Phase II of the SOS! work plan, moving from documentation to care of sculptures in need. A new awards program ran from 1997 to 2002 and gave Assessment Awards paying for over 550 condition assessments by qualified conservators and sixty-



Members of Boy Scout troops participated in the SOS! Survey, including this scout recording information about *Double Spiral Arch* (1987) by Linda Howard in Sarasota, Florida. Photo: Gerry Zeck. [+ Enlarge](#)



The Francis Scott Key Monument (1911) by Marius J. A. Mercie. The monument, [+ Enlarge](#)

four Achievement Awards funding preservation, scholarship, and public awareness activities. The Tender Loving Care program began in four communities in fall 1997, with conservators training volunteers to perform basic maintenance for outdoor sculpture. The program expanded in 1998, with the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts funding Maintenance Training Awards to support training sessions in nineteen communities.

In 1998, SOS! began its most ambitious project, the Conservation Treatment Awards, with funding that Heritage Preservation received from U.S. retailer Target Stores and the National Endowment for the Arts. American First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton helped launch the \$1.4 million project at the Francis Scott Key Monument in Baltimore, which was among the first sculptures to receive conservation treatment under the program. Nonprofit organizations and government agencies were invited to apply for the grants, which required matching funds. Review panels of experienced professionals in the fields of art history, conservation, and public art administration made recommendations for funding based on the significance of the sculpture, the urgency of its need, the ability of the applicant to carry out the project, and the applicant's plans for public awareness.



The Francis Scott Key Monument after conservation treatment. The monument received conservation treatment in the summer of 1999, when SAT Inc. cleaned the bronze and stone, replaced missing parts, and reapplied gold leaf. Photo: ©Ron Solomon.

in Baltimore, Maryland, was badly in need of conservation treatment as it overlooked the kickoff of the SOS! Conservation Treatment Awards in 1998. Photo: Courtesy of SOS!

Conservation Treatment Awards were made to conserve 123 sculptures nationwide, saving them from slow decay by providing treatment from a professional conservator. Along the way, communities rallied around their sculptures, some holding elaborate rededication ceremonies after the treatment and others getting involved in the treatment itself as trainees.

In Hawaii, the town of Kapa'au participated in choosing the conservation treatment of *King Kamehameha I*, a beloved sculpture by Thomas Ridgeway Gould. Conservator Glenn Wharton initially intended to strip off layers of paint and restore the sculpture's original bronze patina and gold-leaf appearance. However, extensive discussion with the community revealed that the townspeople had painted the statue in lifelike colors to give the statue a more human quality. Wharton worked with the Hawai'i Alliance for Arts Education and the King Kamehameha Celebration Commission to determine how the sculpture should be treated. Ultimately, a community-wide vote was held, and 71 percent of the town voted to continue the tradition of painting the sculpture. Wharton stripped the paint off the bronze, treated it with a corrosion inhibitor, and repainted it in colors chosen by community leaders and elders. Townspeople were trained in maintenance techniques and celebrated the sculpture's rededication in June 2001.

While the citizens of Kapa'au already valued their sculpture, some artworks were ignored until someone brought attention to them. From Girl Scout troops earning their SOS! patch to an American Civil War reenactor wanting to save a monument, people were inspired by Conservation Treatment Awards to learn more about sculptures and how to preserve them. SOS! has directly helped approximately one thousand sculptures, and many participants from the initial survey and awards programs continue to be active, advocating for maintenance endowments in percent-for-art projects and raising funds to care for specific sculptures in their communities.

Education Outreach

With knowledge gained through the survey and awards, SOS! developed the Inside Outdoor Sculpture Kit. It features learning activities and materials for grade school children, including science experiments that duplicate the effects of acid rain on various sculpture media, as well as cleaning solutions and waxes that show how treatment protects sculptural surfaces. The exhibit *Preserving Memory: America's Monumental Legacy* toured U.S. venues from September 2002 through April 2005 (and is available for rental from Heritage Preservation). Its twenty color panels feature nearly two hundred artworks and encourage visitors to consider the creation of public sculpture and to reflect on their own community's historic and creative heritage. *Preserving Memory* also explains threats to outdoor sculpture, features communities that have taken steps to preserve these treasures, and includes special panels for children.

"Education has always been part of SOS!" explained Jill Wiley White, coordinator of SOS! "By helping people understand what threatens outdoor sculpture, we increase the chances that they will take steps to protect it. Sculpture is also a great multidisciplinary learning tool—it can teach history, art, and science and lead to more advanced subjects like sociology and politics."

SOS! also continues its educational mission through its Web site. Information about outdoor sculpture maintenance and conservation, as well as a special site for children that includes learning activities, helps visitors learn about and appreciate sculpture in general and learn ways to research sculpture in their area.

The Smithsonian American Art Museum's Inventory of American Sculpture continues to gather data and find new uses for it. After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, many agencies lost their records. SOS! staff at Heritage Preservation sent Art Inventory SIRIS records to State Historic Preservation Offices in five southern states so arts administrators could begin to assess losses. SOS! also developed a rapid assessment form for volunteers to use in evaluating a sculpture's condition. Several new initiatives are under way at IAS, including a project to digitize all inventory photographs. SOS! has also inspired Heritage Preservation's newest program, Rescue Public Murals. Led by an advisory committee of muralists, conservators, art historians, and public art professionals, Rescue Public Murals is developing plans for identifying and documenting U.S. public murals, assessing the condition of especially significant outdoor murals, and raising funds to continue saving and documenting community murals.

Looking to the Future

SOS! continues to look for ways to save more of the nation's collection of outdoor sculpture. Heritage Preservation is seeking funding for a new round of Assessment Awards and the Lincoln SOS!—Saving Abraham Lincoln's Monumental Legacy project, which has been endorsed by the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission. Assessment Awards are the first step in bringing neglected sculptures to light and creating constituencies to care for



King Kamehameha I [+ Enlarge](#)
(1880) by Thomas Ridgeway Gould. The statue was lost at sea on its way to Honolulu, where a replacement statue stands today. The original was later recovered and brought to Kapa'au, Hawaii. During and after conservation treatment, Kapa'au volunteers learned how to care for their town's sculpture. Photo: Glenn Wharton & Associates.

them. Meanwhile, half of the more than 220 sculptures of Lincoln are in serious disrepair as the nation prepares to celebrate the two-hundredth anniversary of his birth. SOS! aims to save significant Lincoln sculptures and give their communities a focal point for commemorative activities.

In its eighteen years, Save Outdoor Sculpture! has learned much about communities and their sculptures and what it takes to bring them together. The bad news is that much work remains to be done. The good news is that most people care about their sculptural heritage when it is brought to their attention, and some will go to great lengths to ensure that it survives for future generations. For SOS! that has been the most welcome lesson of all.

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To learn more about SOS! visit www.heritagepreservation.org and click on "Save Outdoor Sculpture!"



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