Why We Should Put Women on Pedestals

**By JULIA BAIRD**SEPT. 4, 2017

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/04/opinion/women-statues.html>

It’s a perilous time to be a statue.

Not that it has ever been a particularly secure occupation, exposed as statues are to the elements, bird droppings and political winds.

Just ask Queen Victoria, whose rounded frame perches atop hundreds of plinths across the Commonwealth, with an air of solemn, severe solidity. But in 1963 in Quebec, members of a separatist paramilitary group stuck dynamite under the dress of her local statue.

It exploded with a force so great that her head was found 100 yards away. As Leonard Cohen put it in [his novel](https://books.google.com.au/books?id=fKGuP1RlwI4C&pg=PA391&dq=in+her+metal+lap+leonard+cohen&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi4m_md6oPWAhWBJCYKHWbHC2wQ6AEILDAB#v=onepage&q=in%20her%20metal%20lap%20leonard%20cohen&f=false) “Beautiful Losers,” the explosives were placed “on her metal lap.” Which is a bit rude for a queen.

Today, the head is on [display](https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/a-headless-statue-of-queen-victoria-the-flq-and-quebecs-fractious-relationship-with-the-monarchy/article35074360/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&) in a museum, with her body preserved in a room some miles away — separated by a radical anticolonialism the curators want us to remember. The art historian Vincent Giguère told The Globe and Mail, “The fact it’s damaged is what makes it so important.”

History is messy and contested and shifting. It is also usually written by men, about men.

There’s another reason to conserve the beheaded Victoria. Statues of women, standing alone and demanding attention in a public space, are extremely rare.

To be made a statue, a woman had to be a naked muse, royalty or the mother of God. Or occasionally, an icon of war, justice or virtue: Boadicea in her chariot in London, the Statue of Liberty in New York, “The Motherland Calls” in Volgograd.

Still, of 925 public statues in Britain, [only 158](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/jan/09/britain-statues-women-emmeline-pankhurst-ellen-wilkinson-victoria-wood) are women standing on their own. Of those, 110 are allegorical or mythical, and 29 are of Queen Victoria, according to a [study](http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/feminism/2016/03/i-sorted-uk-s-statues-gender-mere-27-cent-are-historical-non-royal-women) of British public monuments by Caroline Criado-Perez. Just 25 are statues of historical women who are not royalty, she writes, “one of whom is a [ghost](http://www.pmsa.org.uk/pmsa-database/4974/) and only there because she’s looking for the spirit of her murdered husband.”

There are 43 statues of men named John.

In the United States, [less than 8 percent](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=.ea862b4465bb) of public statues are female. [Nine](http://time.com/4903612/women-statues-san-francisco/)of 411 national parks are dedicated to women’s history. Which is why women have been stealthily gathering funds to break through the “bronze ceiling” and place statues of women in busy public spaces.

A campaign begun in February called [Put Her on the Map](https://putheronthemap.com/) aims to “encourage cities and corporations to put women on the map by naming streets, statues and buildings after influential female figures.” In Manchester, England, where Queen Victoria is the sole female figure out of 17 statues, the Womanchester Statue Project has been gathering funds for a statue of the suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst.

[Monumental Women](http://www.monumentalwomen.org/) is raising money for a statue of suffragists in Central Park in New York. And a new app, [The Whole Story](http://www.wpp.com/wpp/press/2017/may/01/young-rubicam-introduces-the-whole-story-project/), uses augmented reality technology to place female statues in public spaces everywhere from Washington to Milan, Prague and Rome.

Why does this matter? Because history is skewed. Because women have been rendered invisible and irrelevant for centuries. Because when little girls walk past imposing figures on pedestals, they know they represent status and authority, that this person has done or been something worthwhile.

And if women are on those pedestals, they will know women can matter and make history. Or simply that women are history.

One thing I like most about Victoria’s statues is that she did not pose coquettishly or aim to please the eye. She stood with authority. The primary concern of the woman [Leonard Cohen called](http://www.metrolyrics.com/queen-victoria-lyrics-leonard-cohen.html) “the mean governess of the huge pink maps” was not whether people liked her but whether she liked them.

This monarch, who eschewed corsets and shocked doctors with her frankness about her body, was simply powerful. She loved to surround herself with beauty, most especially her husband’s, but she did not give a fig about her own.

Which is lucky, because her sculptors did not flatter her. When, in 1919, the Arts Gazette asked readers to nominate the ugliest statue in London, George Bernard Shaw thought there were several of Victoria that could qualify. He asked “what crime Queen Victoria committed that she should be so horribly guyed as she has been through the length and breadth of her dominions.

It was part of her personal quality that she was a tiny woman, and our national passion for telling lies in every public subject has led to her being represented as an overgrown monster.” The truth, he said, was that Victoria “was a little woman with great decision of manner and a beautiful speaking voice which she used in public extremely well.” Instead, “All young people now believe that she was a huge heap of a woman.”

Heap or not, she could not be ignored. Which surely is the most obvious upside of visibility.

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