

# Historic wrongs on a pedestal: Ugly past doesn't vanish when the artwork does

*Charles Desmarais*

## Most Popular

[Photo of Charles Desmarais](#)

Feb. 27, 2018 Updated: Feb. 27, 2018 12:40 p.m.



10f2Pioneer Monument on Fulton St on Monday, August 21, 2017 in San Francisco, Calif. Amy Osborne / Special to The Chronicle 2017

Memorial sculpture is not like other art. It is a constrained category, conservative by its nature. The very name carries with it the idea of memory; its purpose is to anchor us to the past.

The San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission voted last week to approve the removal of a Civic Center sculpture that has held a prominent position in the city for well more than a century. In the coming months, the San Francisco Arts Commission is expected to finalize the decision, spending \$160,000 to \$200,000 to hoist from its pedestal a work called “Early Days,” which depicts the subjugation of a stripped-bare American Indian by heavily clad military and religious pioneers.

The move is a response to complaints about what all agree is a racist image, and I get it: Who wants to confront every day a reminder of the horrid things that were done to win for us our privileged lives?

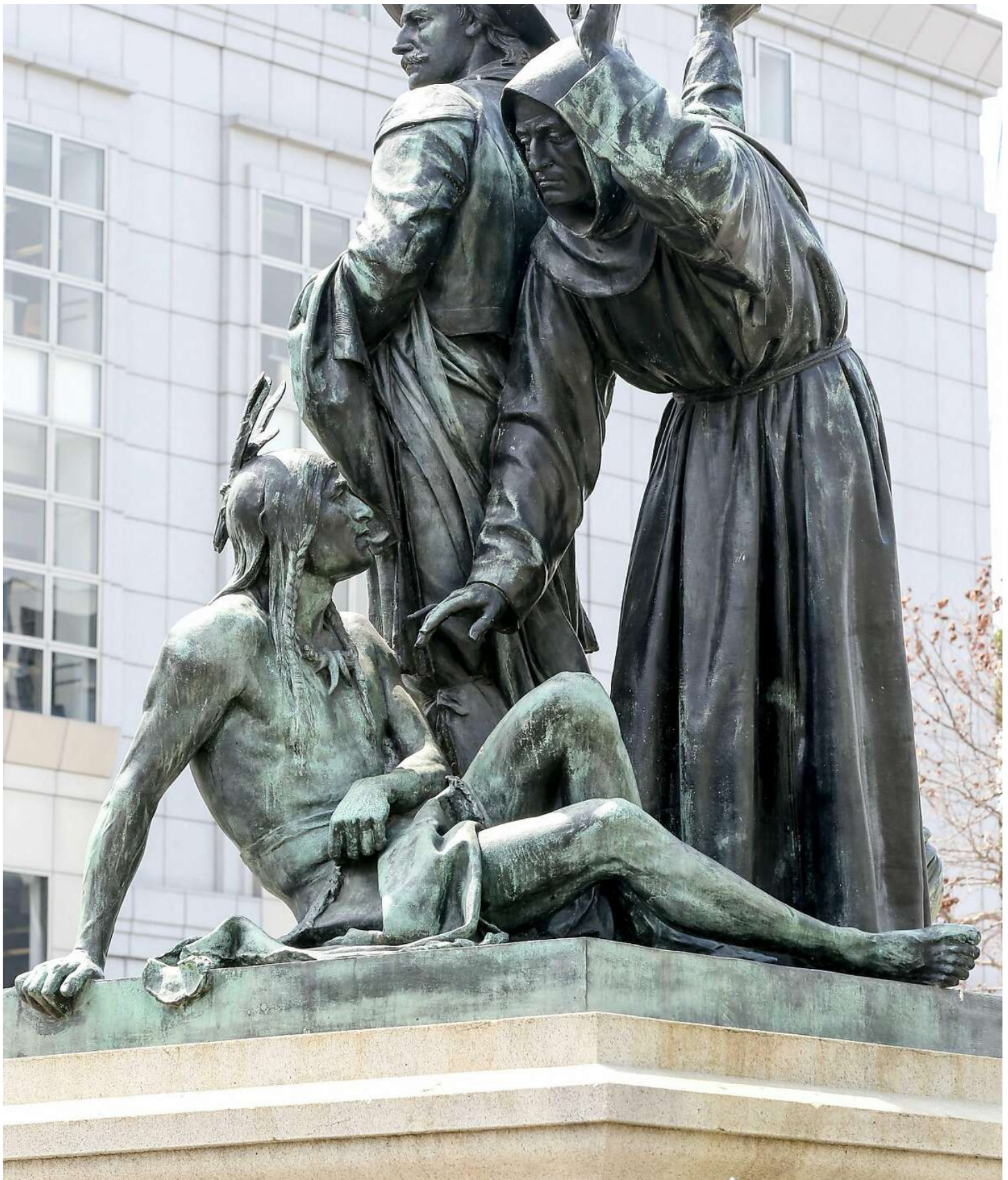
BEST OFFER OF THE YEAR: 6 Months of Access for Only 99¢!

### **6 MONTHS FOR 99¢**

From [The Chronicle's report](#), it is clear that last week's decision was not taken lightly. As one official said, “We're a historical preservation commission ... not a historical revision commission.”







*Pioneer Monument on Fulton St on Monday, August 21, 2017 in San Francisco, Calif.* Amy Osborne/Special To The Chronicle

In the end, however, the vote was unanimous, as it had to be in this moment of frustration and impotence in arenas that matter essentially to living human beings. If our elected leaders won't make



our world safe and they refuse to ensure that it is sane, our appointed local commissioners can at least make a symbolic gesture to represent San Francisco residents' better nature.

One striking feature of the argument to remove "Early Days" — and, by extension, other monuments across the U.S. that embody evils once assumed to be divinely granted rights — is its recognition of the tremendous power of art. Most of us ignore public sculpture, especially of the bronze, memorial sort. It's like the hallway chair that once belonged to Grandmother but is never sat upon, or the picture of the founder as you enter headquarters: Its utility is in its mere presence, in the fact that exists. We trust in its inherent authority; we take note of it only in its absence.

There is no rationale for spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to haul away a bit of useless furniture from a public square unless you grant its unseen power as a talisman. Desperate, we erase "Early Days," the cold, hard object, hoping to squelch a moral fire so fierce we cannot stand its proximity.







*The donor panel of the Haus der Kunst, torn from the wall by American soldiers after World War II, now prominently displayed. Wilfried Petzi/Haus der Kunst*

Others have found ways to come to terms with pasts they despise. Some years ago I came across a twisted bronze plaque, casually leaning against the wall of a corridor in the Haus der Kunst, a distinguished contemporary art museum in Munich. It was torn at the corners, looking something like a tacked-up poster roughly pulled from the wall.

The director told me that he had found the item gathering dust in basement storage. The museum had been built in the Nazi era to glorify German art; its site and its architect were personally selected by Adolf Hitler. After World War II, the American military used the building as an officers' club, at which time the tablet had been pried from its anchor bolts.

The plaque honored project donors, most of them prominent Nazis. Now that the building had returned to a public function, the director had ordered it brought up into public view so that visitors would keep in mind the dark history of the institution, even as they reveled in the current prosperity of their country and their museum.

There are other examples of attempts to preserve what a culture might wish to forget. Moscow and some other cities in the former Soviet Union [created sculpture gardens](#) — effectively graveyards — to which they have relegated Soviet-era monuments.

In a park in Budapest, Hungary, a grand stairway leads up to a kind of altar, atop which is a brick plinth. There, disembodied, stands “Stalin’s Boots,” all that remains of a statue dismantled by what is said to have been an army of 200,000 citizens in revolt.





*Stalin's boots by Akos Eleod*Premium UIG/Getty Images/Universal Images Group

These are ways that other societies seek to move from guilt and grief to self-knowledge and a kind of social-psychological health. To leave the past behind, not by forgetting but by accepting responsibility for it.

To delve into the history of the “Early Days” sculpture, and of the cultural milieu from which it was born, is to dive into the cesspool that is the worst of San Francisco’s past. In 1894, when the sculpture was dedicated as part of a larger “Pioneer Monument,” public art was a big deal. A photograph in the Preservation Commission staff report shows hundreds gathered for the unveiling, with elaborate bunting and perhaps two dozen American flags hung about.

“This monument shall lend luster to the memories of the founders of this commonwealth, and give lasting renown to the name of the Native Son who designed it,” a speaker at the unveiling said. The Native Sons of the Golden West, founded in 1875, erected monuments throughout California in the 19th century, and “Pioneer Monument” patron James Lick and sculptor Frank Happersberger embraced the movement.

Native Sons activities were driven by civic pride and a love of history, but there was also a darker aspect. The organization comprised “only the sons of those sturdy pioneers who arrived on this coast prior to the admission of California as a state.” One early leader was the man who delivered that laudatory dedication speech, a journalist-turned-politician named Willard B. Farwell. The same Farwell published in 1885 a patently racist book detailing what, in a cruelly parallel choice of



adjectives, he called the “native vices” of Chinese immigrants.

A later Native Sons president once explained, “California was given by God to a white people, and with God’s strength we want to keep it as He gave it to us.” The monuments were a part of that plan.

The Arts Commission did try valiantly in the mid-1990s to provide some context for “Pioneer Monument.” It called together an exhaustively diverse advisory panel to compose a plaque describing the travails of American Indians in California, once Europeans began to settle here. The 150-word marker still stands at the site. Unsurprisingly, the text’s brittle, didactic tone is no match for the lurid drama of the “Early Days” sculpture.

Nor could it be. The effort pitched bureaucratic prose against art. Both preach, but only one stirs passion.

Which brings us back to the futile action taken by the Preservation Commission last week. The effort 20 years ago to somehow explain the inexcusable was doomed from the start. And today, we will not cure a malignancy that still infects us by the simple act of erasure.

No wound heals without leaving a scar; no crime is solved without examining the evidence. The reason those displacements of German and Soviet monuments so powerfully rebuke the beliefs of their original builders is that they commemorate an ultimate victory in a war of ideals. The disgraced sculptures remain as the proof of that.

We, on the other hand, are still in the thick of the battle.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle’s art critic. Email: [cdesmarais@sfgate.com](mailto:cdesmarais@sfgate.com)

Twitter: [@Artguy1](https://twitter.com/Artguy1)