The Vermont Connection

Volume 32 *Critical Truths, Empowered Voices, Changing the Landscape of Higher Education* Article 10

January 2011

Culture Through Sculpture: Carving New Understandings and Uses of Campus Sculptures

Salomón Antonio Rodezno

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc

Part of the Higher Education Administration Commons

Recommended Citation

Rodezno, Salomón Antonio (2011) "Culture Through Sculpture: Carving New Understandings and Uses of Campus Sculptures," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 32 , Article 10.
Available at: https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol32/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and Social Services at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Vermont Connection by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact donna.omalley@uvm.edu.

Culture Through Sculpture: Carving New Understandings and Uses of Campus Sculptures

Salomón (Salo) Antonio Rodezno

This article explores a common artifact of history on museum floors and college campuses: sculptures. It looks at: how sculptures contribute to campus culture; reclaiming history through new campus sculptures; using sculptures as a teaching object (object-based pedagogy) in and outside the classroom. The author explores the link museums and college campuses share in their promotion to understand cultural legacies through the acquisition, preservation, exhibition, and interpretation of material culture. The author's visual and performing arts background will interlace his personal and professional narratives providing readers a context complementing this piece.

Even before attending my first lecture in my Master of Education graduate program, my history lesson began as I walked down the main campus of the University of Vermont (UVM). Walking and looking at the architecture of the buildings, the well-kept green landscapes, and the sculptural renditions of university figures, I realized this part of campus was like experiencing a 291 year-old exhibit in a museum. Museums are unique campus resources often promoting the understanding of a university's cultural legacy through the acquisition, preservation, exhibition, and interpretation of its collections of art, archeological artifacts, and other material culture.

The UVM campus first opened its doors to students in the late 18th century and its history is tangible when one walks around the campus and is able to touch a sculpture from 1808. The possibility to physically interact, integrate, and interpret history drew me to work at UVM's Fleming Museum to better understand the integration between the conceptual and practical existing structures in the daily operation of a museum and a college campus. I realized there was more to material cultures, like campus sculptures, than aesthetic enjoyment.

Salo is a 26-year old gay Latino artist originally from North Hollywood, California. He received his Bachelor's degree in Visual Arts and Film Production from the University of California San Diego. Salo is the first in his family to receive a Master's degree in the United States and hopes to continue working as an imaginative artist, creative practitioner, and unconventional scholar. His scholarly curiosities revolve around: campus cultures, first generation college students, campus ghost stories, campus architecture, marketing, equity, and diversity work. *A special thanks to Chris Fearon (Fleming Museum) and Shirley Fortier (Campus Planning Services) for their support and enthusiasm when writing this article.*

This is important to the higher education and student affairs field because sculptures, like other campus material cultures, have the ability to shape the meanings behind what it means to be a college student at a particular campus. A bond is created when students take their first steps and experience their college campus. Administrators in student affairs and higher education serve as their institution's museum curators. They are the cultural keepers ensuring which campus cultures "are maintained, celebrated, and passed on to future generations of students" (Broussard, 2009, p. 13). Therefore, the history of a college campus is living and organic. Administrators, along with faculty, have the ability to create what it does and does not mean to be a student at a college campus. This in turn allows administrators and students to not be observers of a college's history but be active participants in its development. This article explores a common artifact on the museum floor and the college campus: sculptures. It looks at how sculptures contribute to campus culture; how history can be reclaimed through the addition of new sculptures; and how to intentionally use campus sculptures as teaching objects in and outside the classroom via object-based pedagogy.

Author's Bias

I come from an environment fusing art and education – this is where I thrive, dream, and prosper. I was raised in a family of visual, performing, and musical artists - informally being exposed to folk art, painting, embroidery, artisanship, and craftsmanship. When I went off to college I was formally trained in the visual arts focusing on film production (production design, art directing, camera operation and video editing) and performance art. I hoped to integrate my two passions (working with creative individuals and college students) when I enrolled in a master's degree program in higher education and student affairs administration.

During the first three semesters of my program, I was required to select an administrative office of my choosing to integrate my conceptual knowledge of student affairs with some hands-on administrative practice. Wanting to better understand the importance and the connection art plays in an educational setting, I decided to work for the university museum: I would leave this learning experience with a clearer sense of my vocation and myself.

After working at the museum, I realized art and education are my vocational passions. The majority of this article will be narrated by my identity as an educator. My identity as an artist *who is an* educator will surface at the very end of this article.

Intertwining Museums and the College Campus

Culture is often understood as attitudes, behaviors, and artifacts espoused by a particular group of people or setting. Institutions of higher education exercise

cultural artifacts through similar physical (buildings/objects), verbal (acronyms/sayings), and behavioral (rituals/traditions) properties. These properties make up the institutional culture of a college campus (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Similarly, culture is observed in a museum through displayed labels, etiquette, and artifacts.

The Big Idea

Culture in a museum is observed through verbal communication, behaviors, and material culture, also known as artifacts. Descriptions and stories of objects communicate a *verbal* form of culture through written, audio, and visual labeling. The museum etiquette of looking and not touching an object on display is an example of a *behavioral* culture widely practiced and enforced in most museums. *Artifacts* are defined as "any object made by human work" (Merriam-Websters Collegiate Dictionary, 2007, p. 80). Thus, collections of paintings, sculptures, photographs, scientific instruments, furniture, and other objects comprise *material* culture: artifacts. These verbal, behavioral, and physical manifestations of culture are tied together by a *big idea*.

Working at the museum, I learned that the first priority when organizing an exhibition is developing a clear and specific *big idea*. A big idea describes what an exhibition will and will not be about. It is also specific and unique to a single exhibit. It does not confuse, complicate, or provide all the answers to patrons; rather, a big idea is provocative, evocative, and most importantly clear. Serrel (1996) believed the big idea can be a theme, story, or a goal setting the tone and limits to the content in an exhibit. A big idea could be to use historical, scientific, artistic, or cultural interest artifacts to communicate the message of what it means and has meant to be human. College campuses have a very similar big idea.

College campuses share and express subtle and blatant meanings of what it is and has meant to be a college student. This meaning begins to form when students take their first step onto a physical campus such as UVM. Broussard (2009) called this process branding - an identifying marker that makes a college campus unique and different from all other college campuses and experiences. College branding communicates what a particular college campus is and will be about. UVM's Common Ground, for example, is a type of branding that makes UVM a unique campus for prospective students to consider when applying for college. Therefore, the Common Ground is UVM's big idea.

The Common Ground at UVM

Unlike its mission, vision, or strategic goal statement, the Common Ground is a community agreement centered on how to create and foster a campus environment valuing respect, integrity, innovation, openness, justice, and responsibility (UVM,

2009b). The Common Ground communicates what the campus is about and what it aspires to achieve. In a sense, it acts as a guide for the academic, extracurricular, and behavioral attributes on campus. Like a museum exhibit, the Common Ground is a big idea communicating what being a member of the UVM campus will and will not be about. UVM's big idea became very clear to me after walking down the main campus green and coming across three sculptures.

Sculptures

UVM is rich in providing physical artifacts that "visually assert their history…to commemorate important events [and] acknowledge individuals who [helped shape the institution's] development" (UVM, 2001). Architecture, green landscapes, public art and monuments fashion the school's big idea. I took an interest in the sculptures surrounding the main campus green of UVM because they share the same space with students, creating a physical relationship between sculpture and viewer, "which is not without psychological consequences" (Selz, 1963, p. 12). This physical and psychological connection creates an opportunity to explore what it is and has meant to be a student at UVM. Read (1969) described sculptures as physical artifacts challenging viewers to create meanings from what is *seen* while also challenging viewers to reflect on what is *not* seen (p. 25). Sculptures command attention by their mere presence but what do they present aside from the material from which they are made?

Sculptures in a collection are "developed with cleverness and creativity, sharing a cohesive and logical relationship to each other" (Serrel, 1996, p. 5). Nine pieces make up UVM's sculpture collection (see appendix), three of which resemble historical human figures: the Marquis de LaFayette (Figure 9), John Purple Howard (Figure 5), and Ira Allen (Figure 4). At first, the ordinary presence of these sculptures bothered me but I was not sure why. After working at the Fleming, I realized that the presence of these sculptures on campus today represented how UVM had not always been uniformly accessible to those interested in higher education. I did not see myself reflected in these sculptures that communicated time periods where my college campus mostly served students, faculty, and other affiliates who were predominantly White, male, and belonged to the upper socio-economic class. These sculptures reminded me of how Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) believed institutional culture and history are not uniformly accessed or experienced on college campuses (p. 261). For a moment, these sculptures reminded me that UVM was not initially meant for people like me: Latino and from a poor socio-economic class.

As I walked away from the sculptures I realized the meanings of being part of the UVM community have evolved over time. While the three sculptures did not communicate a history capturing the experiences of underrepresented groups, the

sculptures did communicate how the campus was founded and how much it has changed. The sculptures lent themselves to be more than just cultural artifacts; they were objects that were helping me learn about how to use the Common Ground as an administrator.

The *1997 Campus Master Plan* (CMP) used the Common Ground as an overall philosophy guiding the preservation, enhancement, and use of the university's distinctive landscape features, like the sculptures. The CMP recognizes "historic buildings and structures (e.g. sculptures) of the University contribute to an understanding of identity and history" (UVM, 1997). Part of communicating an accurate account of UVM's identity and history is unveiling how the campus was not always inclusive, evident in the prominent three sculptures. However, the sculpture collection could become more representative of UVM's increasingly diverse learning community by introducing new public art pieces. The story of the Ira Allen Chapel and sculpture is an example of how history can be reclaimed.

Reclaiming History

Marshall (1991) told a story of a wealthy businessman named James B. Wilbur who became UVM's most generous benefactor between 1919 and 1929. Wilbur made several monetary donations helping fund the construction of the Ira Allen Chapel and the Ira Allen sculpture (Figure 4). Unveiling Ira Allen's sculpture was very important for Wilbur. He "believed…historians had neglected Ira Allen's role in founding Vermont and its university" (Marshall, p. 62). The sculpture now prominently stands tall in the main campus green as an example of history reclaimed. Informed by Manning (1994), I see this story as an example of how an old form of institutional culture can be used to express the quintessential messages of the campus culture.

New sculptures can be commissioned to contribute another layer to the campus history, one that includes the untold stories of those UVM students who are not represented on the foreground of the college campus through its old forms of culture (sculptures). These new objects could provide prospective students and alumni/ae a more "wholesome sense of history, continuity, and future" of their college campus (UVM, 1997). For example, detailed on UVM's webpage is a bulleted list of traditions of equality (UVM, 2009a). The campus has a history of being "an early advocate of both women's and African American's participation in higher education" (UVM, 2009a). However, if the campus defied custom and admitted women and African Americans throughout history, how is it that the artwork commemorating these student pioneers is absent?

This is an open-ended question that is difficult to answer; however, a possible solution would be for campus leaders to consider commissioning artwork that

expresses the untold histories of some underrepresented but distinguished alumni/ae. Asking questions similar to the one in the previous paragraph allows for multiple solutions to be voiced in order to solve a legitimate campus issue. In this case, I was asking open-ended questions framed around objects: the sculptures. I learned this form of teaching at the museum and found it particularly helpful in creating a learning environment in and outside the classroom.

Teaching with Objects

Object-based pedagogy is a commonly used form of museum teaching that guides students to explore the ideas behind material culture and its relationship to other objects, people, eras, and ideas. It starts when educators carefully develop a big idea and then select objects to help evoke exploration that will be "dependent on the students sharing their [own] questions…thoughts and ideas…and answers" (Alvarado & Herr, 2003, p. 17). For example, if I want to teach about the Victorian Era, I need to carefully select objects clearly serving and exploring this period of time in history. Next, I must develop questions that help guide my students or audience to arrive at an understanding of a big idea. Alvarado and Herr (2003) encourage asking open-ended questions, since these questions do not detract from students directing their own course of learning.

After working at the museum, I created a lesson plan on how sculptures are part of a learning environment in or outside the classroom by anyone interested in exploring institutional culture, artifacts, and object-based pedagogy. I believe the following lesson plan is helpful in a number of ways: teaching higher education culture, working on commissions to update/renew tangible properties of the college campus, and residential advisor's programming related to campus resources. For student affairs professionals particularly, this lesson plan is an excellent way to respond to NASPA's (1987) expectation of creating "opportunities for students to expand their aesthetic and cultural appreciation" (p.13). Moreover, this lesson plan is an example of an intentional way to use campus sculptures in and outside the classroom.

Using Sculptures

My lesson plan explores how environments can shape "attitudes…and the quality of the college experience" (NASPA, 1987, p. 10). Treat your campus sculptures as learning objects that can engage the campus community in or outside the classroom. Carefully select the sculptures (or objects) that clearly serve and explore your syllabi's aim, commission project, program topic/theme, etc. Next, develop open-ended questions that direct your audience (students, co-workers, residents) to create their own course of learning by playfully answering your questions. Generally, I begin with who, what, when, and where questions, followed by questions

asking why and how. These last two questions are more complicated to answer or solve. An example of a "how" question is: how do UVM's sculptures fit or do not fit with the Common Ground? You can further this lesson by complicating and introducing a new but related big idea. For example, you can ask: how is the Common Ground used to make policy, decisions, and tackle controversial issues? Is it used at all? The learning associated with object-based pedagogy is "focused on a process rather than an outcome" (Leinhardt, Crawley, & Knutson, 2002, p. 262). Play with the lesson plan and see what happens.

Conclusion

Museums and higher education are not just storehouses for cultural artifacts and meanings. They are organic environments where communities congregate and learn about the past, present, and future. UVM's sculptures should not just enhance the Common Ground but be an integral part of its values. Toma, Dubrow, and Hartley's (2005) article on strengthening institutional culture claims the best performing institutions are the ones with well-defined values and with clear symbols, narratives, and practices that articulate them. The sculptures are vehicles driving UVM's institutional culture - but it is not clear whether they are currently moving forward or backward. If sculptures solicit an understanding of history at UVM at a deeper level, the possibility for that understanding to carry over in other forms of institutional culture can begin to make other richer connections for the campus community.

Epilogue

"No matter what, continue to do your art." These were the words a former colleague of mine shared with me as she reconnected with her roots as an off-Broadway theater actress while she pursued a high-level administrative position at a medium-sized public university. She encouraged me to stay true to my creative and imaginative self and cultivated in me the confidence to never compromise any part of my artistic identity. I remember seeing her "inner actress" come out as she courageously advocated for affirmative action, equal opportunity, diversity, and equity at her institution. I remember silently admiring her from afar and being honored to have her as a role model.

As I concluded my intertwining of museums and the college campus, I realized I had yet to interlace two important and personal punctuations of my life. Punctuation marks are often used in writing to separate sentences, connect elements, and create meaning. Unlike the terminating properties of the period punctuation mark, writing this article was more like embracing the linking qualities of the hyphen punctuation mark. This article was my way of exploring the connections between my identity as an artist and educator. I believe art *can* create meaningful learning

environments for students and their communities. These are my vocational passions and where my true self nestles and thrives. As I envision myself walking across the stage during commencement and receiving my master's degree this May, I have two hopes for those future artists who see themselves working in the field of higher education and student affairs administration. My two hopes are for those readers to continue working on their art and find ways of incorporating their talents into their daily work as practitioners. And above all else, always be their creative selves.

References

Alvarado, A. E., & Herr, P. R. (2003). In Birdsall, M. (Ed.), *Inquiry-based learning using everyday objects: Hands-on instructional strategies that promote active learning in grades 3-8*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Broussard, E. (2009). The power of place on campus. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55(34),12-17.

Kuh, G.D., & Whitt, E.J. (1988). The invisible tapestry: Cultures in American colleges and universities. *Association for the Study of Higher Education-Education Resources Information Center, Higher Education Report [ASHE-ERIC] 17*(1). Washington, DC: Association for the Study of Higher Education

Leinhardt, G., Crowley, K., & Knutson, K. (2002). *Learning conversations in museums*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Marshall, J. D. (c1991). Universitas Viridis Montis, 1791-1991: *An exhibition of documents and artifacts telling the story of the University of Vermont*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont.

Merriam-Websters Collegiate Dictionary (11th ed.). 2007. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. (1987). *A perspective on student affairs.* National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. Washington, DC.

Read, H. (1969). The image of man. *The art of sculpture* (3rd ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Read, B., Leethwood, C., Archer, L. (2003). Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of 'belonging' and 'isolation' at a post-1992 university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28(3). doi:10.1080/03075070310000113397

Selz, J. (1963). *Modern sculpture: Origins and evolution* (Annette Michelson Trans.). New York, NY: G. Braziller.

Serrell, B. (1996). *Exhibit labels: An interpretive approach*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Toma, J. D., Dubrow, G., & Hartley, M. (2005). *The uses of institutional culture: Strengthening identification and building brand equity in higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

University of Vermont. (1997). *The University of Vermont 1997 campus master plan*: Burlington, VT: University of Vermont.

University of Vermont. (2009a). *History and tradition: About UVM*. Retrieved October 31, 2009, from http://www.uvm.edu/about_uvm/?Page=history/default.html&SM=historysubmenu.html

University of Vermont. (2009b). *Our Common Ground.* Retrieved October 31, 2009, from http://www.uvm.edu/nfo/administration/?Page=administration_factsandstats_common.php&SM=administration_submenu_factsandstats.html

Appendix

Figure 1. Aschenbach, P. (1960-1). The Tree of Knowledge [metal sculpture]. Photographed by Salomon Rodezno.

Figure 2. Brown, J. (1989/1993). Lamentations [recycled scrap steel sculpture]. Photographed by Salomon Rodezno.

Figure 3. Erdman, R. (2010). Primavera [bronze sculpture]. Photographed by Salomon Rodezno.

Figure 4. Fry, S. (1921). Ira Allen [bronze sculpture]. Photographed by Salomon Rodezno.

Figure 5. Hartley, J. (1883). John Purple Howard [bronze sculpture]. Photographer unknown.

Figure 6. Smith, G. (1990-91). Kindred Spirits [steel sculpture]. Photographed by Salomon Rodezno.

Figure 7. Sparling, D. (1998). UVM Catamount [bronze sculpture]. Photographed by Salomon Rodezno.

Figure 8. Unknown artist. (1848). UVM Boulder [granite]. Photographed by Salomon Rodezno.

Figure 9. Ward, J.Q.A. (1883). Marquis de LaFayette [bronze sculpture]. Photographed by Salomon Rodezno.