

# The New York Times

## In New York and More, Public Art Is Taking on Thorny Social Issues

Supported by government programs and private donors, art is proliferating in the public square.

By Tanya Mohn  
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“Oracle,” a 25-foot-tall bronze statue, is one of more than 100 works by Sanford Biggers on display at Rockefeller Center. “It’s the first time we’ve invited an artist to take over the entire campus,” an official of the company that owns the center said. Credit...Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Sanford Biggers, a New York City-based multimedia artist whose bold and edgy artwork tackles thorny social, political and economic themes — often through a historic lens — installed more than 100 pieces throughout the public spaces of Rockefeller Center in Manhattan in early May.

A massive, 25-foot-tall bronze sculpture titled “Oracle” and a series of small-scale ones that combine African masks and European figures, mixed media works using antique quilts, and a 125-foot-long mural entitled “Just Us” that questions ideas of justice, are among those on view through June 29.

“It’s the first time we’ve invited an artist to take over the entire campus in the history of Rockefeller Center,” said Rob Speyer, president and chief executive of Tishman Speyer, the real estate firm that owns the landmark property.

The center’s commitment to public art began in the 1930s soon after construction was completed with the establishment of more than 100 works on permanent display, including the “Prometheus” sculpture by Paul Manship, and “American Progress,” one of 12 murals by José Maria Sert.

“To include this permanent art collection in the middle of the Great Depression was one of the great cultural contributions in history,” Mr. Speyer said. “We try to complement the permanent art with contemporary public art exhibitions, and, in effect, honor the legacy of what the Rockefellers created.” One or two large pieces were initially added to the collection annually, but the public art program now focuses on year-round, campus wide temporary displays.

During the pandemic, programming expanded. “Art in Focus,” which presented works by contemporary New York artists — from large-scale sculptures to whimsical illustrations — hidden in surprising locations, increased the number of artists featured.

“The Flag Project,” a crowdsourced exhibition that began in response to Covid-19, celebrated New Yorkers and their resilience. Banners designed by the public were flown from the flagpoles surrounding the center’s ice-skating rink alongside those from well-known artists like Jeff Koons.



“The Flag Project” at Rockefeller Center, an exhibition of banners designed by the public that began in response to Covid-19 and celebrates New Yorkers and their resilience. Credit...via Tishman Speyer

“The return of culture and the return of people to embrace that culture is ultimately what’s going to carry our city out of Covid,” Mr. Speyer said. “Our responsibility to enhance the public art program is greater than ever, just as it was during the Great Depression.”

Penny Balkin Bach, executive director and chief curator of the Association for Public Art, a nonprofit that commissions and promotes public art in Philadelphia, said viewership likely rose during the pandemic, as it was often the only means for people to safely engage with artworks. “Public art organizers all over the country began to realize that because there was increased use of public spaces, it was an opportunity to call attention to the artwork.”

Americans for the Arts, a nonprofit that runs the Public Art Network, said there was increased interest in public art tours in many communities during the pandemic, like Atlanta, Denver and Waynesville, N.C., but it was consistent with the overall growth trend across the country. A survey it conducted found that in 2001 there were an estimated 350 public art programs; by 2017, that number had more than doubled to 728 programs. In a 2018 public opinion survey, 79 percent of respondents said they were in favor of art in parks, downtown areas, and other public places, up from 72 percent in 2015.

In the last decade, at least a half-billion dollars was invested in public art nationwide; most projects were publicly funded, though private funding is increasing, the nonprofit group said.

Most public funds support permanent projects, but temporary ones, now about a quarter of all projects, are increasing, and are likely to be privately funded.

The growth of public art is global, said Daniel Tobin, founder of Urban Art Projects, a Brisbane, Australia-based international company that collaborates with artists, curators, and public officials to produce public art. “We have witnessed unprecedented demand for public art in cities and communities around the world,” he said.

Over the last three decades, for example, the public art industry in Australia, Asia and the Middle East has “undergone seismic change,” Mr. Tobin said, as strategies developed for single sites have turned into citywide master plans.



Jaime Molina’s sculptural totem pole “La Veleta/The Weathervane” is one of many works featured in Denver’s self guided tours of public art. Credit...via Denver Arts & Venues, Public Art Program

His company has been working with Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on a program to commission some 1,000 public artworks throughout the city that will, he said, “transform the capital.”

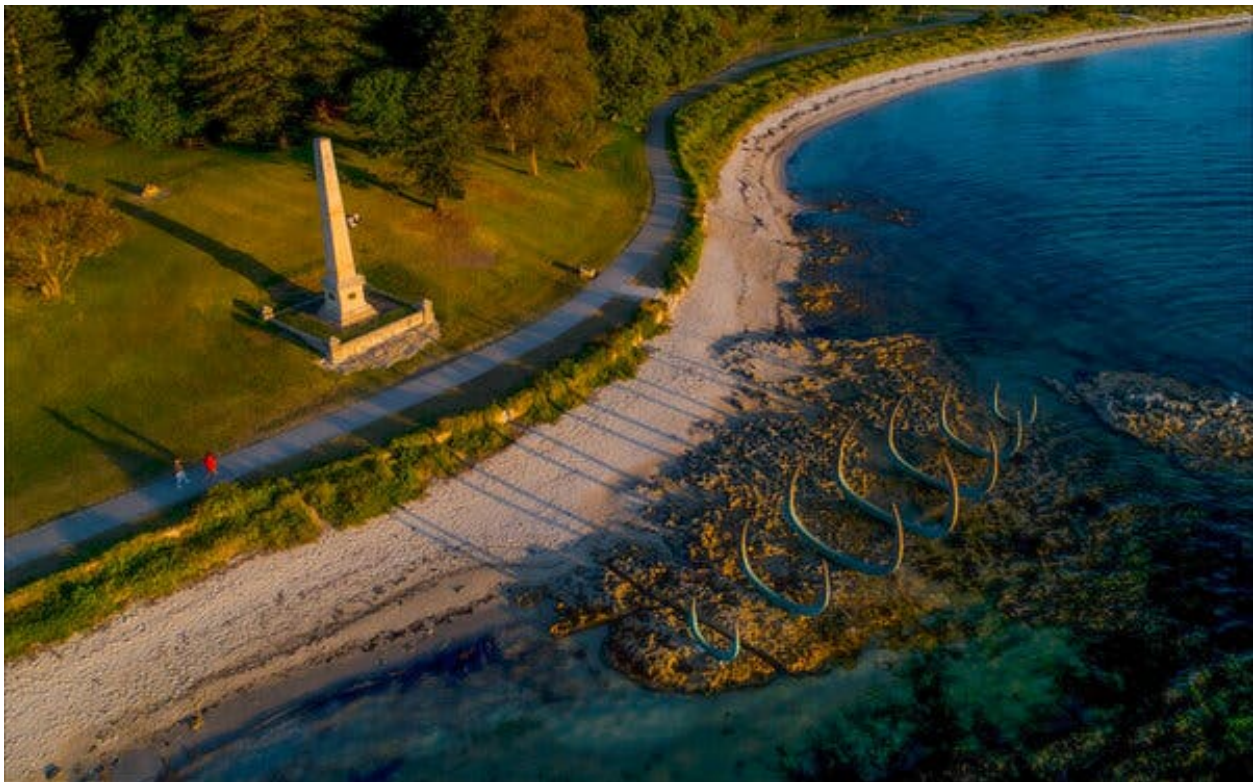
Public art in the United States has many roots, but a few influences predominate, art historians say.

“We have to look to Europe,” said Harriet F. Senie, professor of art history at City College New York and the CUNY Graduate Center. “If we think about any European city, if there’s a public square, there’s usually a statue.”

Initially most public sculpture involved statues to commemorate individuals, but today, she said, the trend is “to celebrate values and groups of people, because history is never only made by one person.”

The City Beautiful movement was also important in the development of public art. Beginning in the late 19th century, design, sculpture and landscaping were incorporated into urban planning to encourage public engagement.

Before museums proliferated, most art was in private collections, Ms. Bach said. “Parks were meant to be very egalitarian spaces and would benefit from the placement of art that would be available and accessible to everyone.”



In Sydney, Australia, “The Eyes of the Land and the Sea” by Alison Page and Nik Lachajczak consists of seven ribs, resembling both the hull of the Lt. James Cook’s ship Endeavour and the bones of a whale. Urban Art Projects, which collaborates with artists to produce public art, assisted with the work. Credit...Alison Page and Nik Lachajczak, via Urban Art Projects

Public funding got a major push beginning with the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) Federal Art Project during the Great Depression. “It was the first, broad scale public art initiative,” Professor Senie said. The government hired artists for everything from designing

posters to painting murals in post offices and other government buildings. “Everybody had to be put to work, and that included artists,” she said.

Later, public funding was largely provided by programs that designated a percentage of government budgets to support public art.

There are now more than 400 such programs nationwide, Ms. Bach said. “For example, if a community library is being built, a small amount of construction costs will be allocated for art.” Nearly three-quarters of public art projects are paid for by percent-for-art allocation, according to Americans for the Arts.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the National Endowment for the Arts Art in Public Places program also contributed to public artwork.

(Earlier this month, New York City announced \$25 million in funding to put thousands of local artists to work to create everything from performances and pop-up shows to murals and other public artworks. The initiative, inspired by past federal programs like the W.P.A., aims to beautify and activate public spaces, as well as stimulate the city’s recovery.)

A public art revival occurred in the 1960s in response to modern architecture’s austere International style, which no longer integrated reliefs, sculptures and other decorations into building exteriors.

“Civic leaders were beginning to realize that as an architectural trend, what was lost was the humanity that could be expressed through works of art at pedestrian scale.” Ms. Bach said.

“Today, by far, the most dominant focus for public art,” Professor Senie said, “is to be more socially conscious and inclusive, for artists to become directly involved with the issues in society.”