

Mayor Bobby J. Hopewell  
Kalamazoo City Hall  
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March 5, 2018

Dear Mayor Hopewell and City Commission Members,

As an organization dedicated to promoting free speech, including freedom of artistic expression, we were concerned to learn that the Kalamazoo City Commission is considering the permanent removal of *Fountain of the Pioneers*, a large, site-specific work of public art that occupies the center of Bronson Park. Since the relocation of such a physically integrated work could only be achieved by the irreversible act of demolishing it, NCAC advises the City to move slowly as it considers the serious ramifications of destroying this artwork (including the precedent it would set for dealing with future public artworks that may spark strong emotions). We strongly urge you to take time to listen to a wide range of opinions and fully consider all options before committing to this costly and controversial undertaking.

*Fountain of the Pioneers* was created for Kalamazoo in the late 1930s, and has inspired debate ever since. It is a large Art Deco-style sculptural work that incorporates a reflecting pool and the stylized figures of a "Pioneer" and an "Indian," the latter standing approximately 18 feet tall from the floor of the pool. It was created by the Italian-American Modernist artist and designer Alfonso Iannelli, and dedicated in 1940 under the Works Progress Administration. In 2016, it was listed as a nationally significant work in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Bronson Park has been located at the center of a NRHP district since 1983.

At a meeting of the City Commission last October, a group of protestors put forward their interpretation of this artwork as an embodiment of white supremacist hate and oppression. However, according to some who have studied the work, including educators and art historians, the sculpture symbolizes Native American resistance to westward expansion. Those who are familiar with Iannelli's work and the period in which he created it, claim that he incorporated this anti-westward expansion message as abstractly as possible lest it spark controversy.

After the events of Charlottesville, many cities have appointed special task forces to re-evaluate public visual representations of white supremacy that appear to celebrate our national legacy of racial divisiveness. However, we must not confuse works of art such as Iannelli's with monuments that were historically intended to send a clear racist message. While *Fountain of the Pioneers* is an art work that *allows for multiple interpretations*, Confederate monuments, most of them erected in the Jim Crow era in the 1920s, explicitly celebrate the values of the Old South, among them the belief in white supremacy.

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**NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS**

Actors' Equity Association  
American Association of School Administrators  
American Association of University Professors  
American Association of University Women  
American Booksellers for Free Expression  
American Civil Liberties Union  
American Ethical Union  
American Federation of Teachers  
American Jewish Committee  
American Library Association  
American Literary Translators Association  
American Orthopsychiatric Association  
American Society of Journalists & Authors  
Americans United for Separation of Church & State  
Association of American Publishers Authors Guild  
Catholics for Choice  
Children's Literature Association  
College Art Association  
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund  
The Creative Coalition  
Directors Guild of America  
The Dramatists Guild of America  
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund  
Educational Book & Media Association  
First Amendment Lawyers Association  
Free Speech Coalition  
International Literacy Association  
Lambda Legal  
Modern Language Association  
National Center for Science Education  
National Communication Association  
National Council for the Social Studies  
National Council of the Churches  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Teachers of English  
National Education Association  
National Youth Rights Association  
The Newspaper Guild/CWA  
PEN American Center  
People For the American Way  
Planned Parenthood Federation of America  
Project Censored  
SAG-AFTRA  
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.  
Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators  
Student Press Law Center  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Union of Democratic Intellectuals  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
United Church of Christ  
Office of Communication  
United Methodist Church, United Methodist Communications  
Women's American ORT  
Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance  
Writers Guild of America, East  
Writers Guild of America, West

Given that the Commission's rationale for removing the work is that it can be interpreted as racist towards Native Americans, we urge you to consider that the demolition of *Fountain of the Pioneers* goes against the wishes of the Gun Lake Tribal Council, the local tribal group that has been working with the City to restore the fountain for over a decade. In a letter dated November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the Gun Lake Tribal Council expressed their understanding that "History cannot be erased by simply tearing down [a] controversial artwork because of interpretations. Removing the Iannelli sculpture will not change the fact that many of our Pottawatomoni relatives were in fact 'forcibly removed' west of the Mississippi River."

While removing the work will not change history, it could provide much needed opportunities to bring that history to light – something that would counter racist attitudes rather than confirm them. Together with the online initiative that is currently under development, *Fountain of the Pioneers* opens a necessary conversation and creates awareness of forgotten or suppressed histories.

In light of new developments regarding public visual artworks and monuments post-Charlottesville, we strongly advise the City to appoint a new special task force and to listen to the many voices of its community, not just those of one group of protesters. We urge the City to move slowly as it considers the diverse members of the community as they voice their concerns over the fate of this historically significant artwork. Artworks often invite strong emotions, and if we were to remove every artwork that did so, we would significantly impoverish our public sphere.

We are happy to offer the City further assistance as needed.

Sincerely,



Joy Garnett  
Arts Advocacy Associate  
National Coalition Against Censorship

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