

A Question of Stature: Restoring and Ignoring *Rocky*

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Abstract:

This article examines 25 years of debate surrounding the Rocky statue, a bronze sculpture of fictional boxer Rocky Balboa that was created as a movie prop for Sylvester Stallone's 1982 movie, *Rocky III*. After Stallone presented the sculpture as a gift to Philadelphia, local officials, residents and Stallone himself clashed over whether it belonged on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art where countless individuals flocked to reenact Rocky's iconic run up the museum's steps. Critics who identified the statue as an advertisement for the film series or as a movie prop, but not as a work of fine art, argued that it would be more appropriately installed at the city's sports complex. Traditional media outlets presented a reduced version of events that pitted everyday *Rocky* fans against elitist art snobs. The statue was linked to class-related conflicts in Philadelphia but it also played a role in the city's attempt to navigate its relationship to an imagined cultural heritage. I propose that the case of the Rocky statue is more complex than the simple high/low dichotomy presented by journalists and agitated observers. Over time, the statue was transformed into a city icon that was first highlighted by, and then implicitly included in, Philadelphia's tourism initiatives.

Keywords: Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Rocky*, art controversy, A. Thomas Schomberg, Sylvester Stallone

A Question of Stature: Restoring and Ignoring Rocky

Philadelphia and prizefighter Rocky Balboa have been intertwined since the first *Rocky* movie debuted in 1976. Shot on location around the city, the film tells the story of a down-and-out boxer who beats the odds and holds his own in a widely publicized match against the reigning heavyweight champion. Like the title character, the film, too, achieved unexpected success. The low budget movie went on to win an Academy Award for Best Picture. It also sparked a wave of Philadelphia tourism that continues to this day.¹ Yet for 25 years *Rocky* was an especially divisive topic of debate in the city. Much of the tension stemmed from a bronze sculpture of the title character that Stallone commissioned from sculptor A. Thomas Schomberg in 1980. The piece was featured in the third *Rocky* film (1982) as fictional Philadelphia's monument to the boxer and Stallone offered to donate the sculpture to the actual city upon the completion of the *Rocky III* shoot. He proposed installing the object at the top of the stairway that led to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Known as the "Rocky Steps," the site was meaningful within the context of the *Rocky* movies and had emerged as an actual, informal place of pilgrimage for *Rocky* fans that flocked to the site to run up the stairs as Rocky had memorably done in the film. Stallone's overture, however, was met with resistance from some members of the Philadelphia community who viewed the object as a publicity tool for the *Rocky* franchise, not an artwork worthy of being showcased alongside some of the most well-known pieces in the city. They suggested instead that the sculpture might be more appropriately located at the city's sports complex. The widespread conflict over where to place

the statue persisted for a quarter of a century and received extensive media attention. During that time the statue was periodically moved to different locations around Philadelphia before it was permanently installed at Eakins Oval near the museum's steps in 2006.

After decades of debate, arguments about where to place the statue had changed little. No groundbreaking scholarship had revealed the sculpture to be of previously unrecognized quality or importance and media coverage of debates over the statue told the same types of stories that had been presented for years. Perhaps the committees that had previously blocked the sculpture's installation at the museum had simply grown tired after the long conflict and acquiesced to allow one final wave of *Rocky* fever that would coincide with the first film's 30th anniversary and the release of the sixth and final film in the series. But I argue instead that the ultimate resolution of the Rocky statue controversy has as much to do with negotiating Philadelphia's reputation as it does with fatigue or box office sales. By installing the statue near the museum in 2006, officials in the city embraced the object not as an advertisement for the film series, but as a city icon. In this role the statue's prominence both expanded and receded. Understanding the Rocky statue in this way is particularly valuable today, as cities including and beyond Philadelphia leverage public art as a place-marketing tool. ²

This article is based upon my close reading of hundreds of press clippings as well as letters, memos and other documents that pertain to the Rocky statue and were written over the course of nearly three decades. By carefully examining the discourse surrounding the Rocky statue beginning in the 1980s, I first demonstrate that each dispute was tied to competing visions about how to best

represent Philadelphia. I then consider the ways in which Philadelphia's tourism initiatives reflect the city's changing relationship to *Rocky*. In doing so, I show that the Rocky statue is far more complex than the simplistic high/low dichotomy presented by journalists and agitated observers. The statue's significance was shaped simultaneously by its location and by public discourse. In turn, the statue also shaped Philadelphia. Layers of meaning accumulated as the statue moved from one place to another; when installed at Eakins Oval near the Philadelphia Museum of Art, it could convey more fully the richness of its significance.³

The Bronze Boxer

The eight-foot six-inch figure is dressed for a match: Rocky sports boxing shoes, knee socks, personalized shorts, and little else (Figure 1). His crisply shaped abs ripple upward into toned pectorals and biceps, which bulge as he raises his boxing glove-clad hands in the air. The victorious arm gesture frames a stoic face that gazes ever so slightly downward, to the figure's right, while thick waves of hair swathe the boxer's head. Rocky towers stiffly over his audience. His right knee bends as if to suggest the traditional contrapposto stance of classical sculptures of athletes, but the weight shift remains incomplete: there is no corresponding tilt in the figure's hips, no contrasting angle in his shoulders. It is appropriate, if only by coincidence, that the figure was frozen in this awkward pose, standing uncomfortably as people fought over him for 25 years. After the statue first appeared as a prop in *Rocky III* it was shuffled around the city, occasionally on view atop the Rocky Steps, but most often at the Spectrum Arena

in South Philadelphia. For a quarter of a century there was neither official agreement nor public consensus about the best place to display the statue.⁴

The responsibility of determining the Rocky statue's location lay in many hands. Established in 1907 under a different name, the City of Philadelphia Art Commission was charged with managing the city's acquisitions of public art, as well as regulating construction projects that received funding from the city government and determining whether certain signage could appear in specific areas of the city.⁵ *Rocky III* producers thus needed to obtain permission from the Art Commission before they could install the Rocky statue at the museum's steps, even temporarily for the film shoot. Stallone's donation of the statue to the city required similar approval. Philadelphia's Fairmount Park Commission also had to approve both proposals because the museum stood on park grounds. In a joint meeting on 10 December 1980, the two delegations determined that the statue could be placed on the steps while the scene for the movie was filmed, but it could not stay there after the shoot because the sculpture was chiefly a promotional item and therefore had no place on the museum mount. They did not want to display perpetually an advertisement for the *Rocky* films in this prominent location.⁶

The committees' decision received extensive press coverage that spurred a range of reactions to the Rocky statue's fate. Philadelphians who joined the "Rocky Must Stay" campaign to install the statue permanently in the city blamed "'art critic' types" for rejecting an important cultural object.⁷ Meanwhile, Henry S. McNeil, Jr., an eminent local art patron whose brother was a trustee of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, lamented that the press was paying so much

attention to “a poorly wrought promotion” instead of discussing the truly impressive public sculptures that were already part of the city’s collection.⁸ These points of view are indicative of the two main lines of argument regarding the Rocky statue: the group that journalists presented as a broad assembly of Philadelphia’s working class public celebrated the statue as a populist monument to the everyman and as a symbol of Philadelphia’s national fame; while others, fused together by public opinion into an elite constituency, disparaged the statue as a “schlocky” publicity tool for *Rocky* that detracted from the city’s cultural reputation.

Although the museum had no official control over the grounds on which its building was located, it remained connected to negotiations about where to install the statue. As museum president Robert Montgomery Scott wrote to one City Council representative in 1981: “The Art Museum Trustees feel that the Museum shares jurisdiction with the Art Commission as to the objects of art to be placed on the ‘podium’ on which the Art Museum sits. If the Art Commission determines to reconsider its decision, you can be sure that the Board of Trustees of the Museum will be happy to discuss the matter with the Art Commission.”⁹ The museum’s official “Statement on the Removal of the Rocky Statue” echoed this sentiment in a manner that allowed it to appear neutral in the particular case of the Rocky statue. Instead of addressing Schomberg’s sculpture in particular, the institution made a statement pertaining to all sculpture in general. The official language on the topic declared that “[t]he site at the top of the Museum steps is inappropriate for the permanent placement of any sculpture. It breaks

the great sweep of space and line of view between City Hall and the Museum, as intended by the architects and planners of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.”¹⁰

At the end of the *Rocky III* shoot, the statue was taken down from the museum’s steps, but it reappeared at the top of the stairs for several weeks in 1982 as publicity for the film’s release. When the film’s promoters neglected to de-install the sculpture at the end of the agreed-upon period of display, the museum arranged to have the statue removed.¹¹ It was sent to South Philadelphia and installed at the Spectrum, an arena that was home to some of the city’s professional sports teams and had hosted boxing matches similar to Rocky’s in the movie. Statue supporters were not entirely satisfied by this change in venue, but they were glad to have the sculpture in Philadelphia.¹² Questions about where Schomberg’s piece should be displayed arose again when *Rocky V* (1990) went into production in 1989, but after a brief return to the museum’s steps for a cameo in the film, the statue was reinstalled at the Spectrum. It stayed there for 16 more years before ending up in storage in 2005 while producers debated using it in *Rocky Balboa* (2006), the film that brought the *Rocky* series to a close. The statue’s base had been damaged during its many relocations and it was determined that conservation was necessary to return the sculpture to a structurally sound condition.¹³ In 2006 Stallone proposed to restore the aging sculpture if it could once again be displayed atop the museum’s stairs. The controversy heightened in May of that year. Months of debate followed by a series of Art Commission hearings eventually resulted in a new home for the statue that September: at the foot of the museum mount, to the right of the base of the Rocky Steps (Figure 1).

Interpretations of the Statue

When interested parties voiced their opinions about where the statue belonged, they were negotiating the roles that high and popular culture should play in shaping Philadelphia's appearance and reputation. Although these conversations occurred periodically the ideas voiced remained relatively consistent; thus three distinct moments of the controversy were blurred in a single 25-year-long negotiation. Writing in a scholarly anthology in the wake of the 1989 episode of Rocky statue controversy, Danielle Rice contended that the then most recent outbreak of debate must be understood as distinct from the earliest phase in the early 1980s. She explained that when advocates for the statue positioned themselves in stark opposition to the art establishment during the second round of controversy, they did so as part of the broader "conservative backlash against the arts" that was famously linked to the censorship of works by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. In this way the second wave of the Rocky statue controversy stood out as unique from the first.¹⁴ Rice's argument is compelling, but looking at all three periods of dispute—not just the first two—there is also a striking continuity. In each outburst of controversy, Philadelphia's public image was at stake. The location of the Rocky statue became a matter of contention for Philadelphians based on their politicized identities. The status also offered a way for the City of Philadelphia to make an international statement about its local character.

Throughout the debates, those who rejected the Rocky statue on the grounds of its unabashed commercialism implicitly argued that Philadelphia

deserved to be recognized foremost for its longstanding highbrow culture.¹⁵ For them it was appropriate to understand the present city in terms of its connections to the region's previous cultural achievements. Their Philadelphia was the legacy of painter and collector Charles Willson Peale, who established the first natural history museum in the United States in 1786 and founded the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts two decades later. It was captured in the work of artists Thomas Eakins and Cecilia Beaux who painted images of the city and its residents before Philadelphia lost its premiere cultural standing to New York in the early twentieth century. Evidence of the city's high culture accomplishments lingered in its world-class art collections, the wealthy patrons who supported such institutions and the slightly less affluent residents and visitors who felt an affinity with the objects on view. This sector of Philadelphia's cultural landscape was founded and funded by leaders in the fields of law, medicine and pharmaceuticals. Like art, these industries thrived in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, but they also remained strong long after the city's cultural status declined. The objects and institutions that remained affiliated with those individuals and organizations offered turn-of-the-twenty-first-century patrons a connection to the city's earlier prestige.

Patron Henry S. McNeil, Jr., whose family fortune derived from the pharmaceutical industry, asserted in 1982 that Philadelphia's handling of the statue controversy would directly affect the region's reputation. He explained that "a self-serving 'Rocky' shrine ensconced on the Art Museum steps [w]as one less negative image for [the] city to avoid."¹⁶ Over 20 years later the city's Public Art Director received an emailed screed about accepting Rocky on the museum's

grounds. Albeit with a more aggressive tone than had been adopted by her predecessor, this 2006 writer similarly insisted that “[the] decision to install a worthless used movie prop in a place of honor on the grounds of the Philadelphia Museum of Art marks a new low for Philadelphia and the image we project to the world... [A]s a long time working artist I expect our cultural leaders to promote the highest standards when authorizing public art, not celebrate [the] crass commercial interest of the lowest forms of celebrity worshipping pop culture sells everything world we increasingly live in.”¹⁷ The statue’s detractors emphasized the object’s role as a movie prop and an advertisement as evidence of its difference from fine art.¹⁸ For them, it threatened to devalue the city’s cultural status and, in turn, the status of the people who wanted Philadelphia to be recognized for its highbrow achievements, not its pop culture fame.

Although individuals who opposed installing the Rocky statue in front of the art museum decried the sculpture for its pop culture connections, many people who believed that the statue belonged at the Rocky Steps highlighted the object’s pop culture significance as the main justification for their position. They claimed that the statue was an important Philadelphia icon and that it therefore deserved to be displayed prominently at the site in the city with which it was most strongly associated.¹⁹ For the statue supporters, Schomberg’s sculpture was evidence of Philadelphia’s prominence in late-twentieth-century American culture, but what they valued was Philadelphia’s widespread visibility (catalyzed by the *Rocky* films), not its sophistication. This sentiment surfaced intermittently throughout the extended debate. A 1981 editorial from Philadelphia’s *Times Northeast* explained that the statue was important because “the creator of boxer

Rocky Balboa... put the Philadelphia Museum of Art on the international map for millions who associate that institution with the City of Brotherly Love.”²⁰ Even Art Commission member Nancy Kolb, who voted to move the statue to the museum area in 2006, explained that the statue, not just the film character, “[had] become a cultural icon for the city.” She went on: “I don’t think it is demeaning the city, because we have a whole lot of people that are coming to Philadelphia from all over the world to run up and down the museum steps and to try to find Rocky. And for me that is a very compelling reason to put [the statue] back in the context of the Art Museum.”²¹ For advocates like Kolb, embracing the Rocky statue at the museum site was a way of embracing the perceived boost in popularity that the films created for the city.²²

When people argued in favor of permanently placing *Rocky* at the museum they, like the statue’s detractors, wanted to make their vision for Philadelphia’s culture the dominant one. It is significant that individuals who did not identify with the art community placed such importance on a bronze sculpture because it demonstrates the major role that visual culture can play in shaping a sense of civic identity, even for people who do not feel connected to the social sphere that is expressly invested in the exchange of cultural capital.²³ In 2006, the argument that the statue was a local icon and therefore deserved to be embraced by the city—including by its arts specialists—won out.²⁴ Statements from those who touted Rocky’s iconic qualities offer a positive reaction to the fame and attention that *Rocky* brought to Philadelphia. Members of the City Council and the city’s tourism board, and a number of *Rocky* fans liked having their city seen on screen in five out of six *Rocky* films, and they liked that the

Rocky Steps drew so many visitors to the site at the end of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. In their opinion, those achievements were worth celebrating.²⁵

Details Overlooked

Although the Rocky debate suggested a total separation between the elitist “art world” and the rest of Philadelphia, the city was not as sharply divided as public discourse suggested. The discussions about Philadelphia’s perceived sense of self were carried out in public forums so outcomes were ultimately determined by how those discussions *appeared*, rather than by the nuanced layers out of which they were constructed. Even if public conversations about the subject elided those subtleties, it is important to examine more closely the seemingly clear split between parties in the debate. It may not be surprising that the controversy’s multifaceted public was reduced to such distinctly partisan camps, but examining some of the perspectives that did not make it into the popular press reveals an oversimplification in the way the dispute was presented to its audience.

Philadelphia’s art community was not as monolithic on this issue as it was made out to be. For example, there is an email from Philadelphia Museum of Art Senior Press officer Frank Luzi who alerted his colleagues to yet another press clip from the 2006 controversy: “I take offense to [the writer’s] belief that none of us at the Museum have ever done the Rocky Run. I ran the steps in a suit the day I interviewed for this job!!!”²⁶ Luzi might not state his personal stance on the appropriate location for the Rocky statue in this work-related message, but he nonetheless indicates that being affiliated with a leading high culture institution in the city did not preclude someone from also being a *Rocky* fan.

Similarly, the pro-statue contingent was not as diametrically opposed to the museum crowd. Stallone was one of the most persistent advocates for installing the Rocky statue in front of the museum. Even after a contract between *Rocky V* producers and the Philadelphia Museum of Art stipulated that “the film company not take advantage of the situation with regard to the return of the statue for press purposes and that, if necessary, the film company executives go on record stating that... it is inappropriate for [the statue] to remain permanently at the Museum,”²⁷ Stallone continued to push city committees to vote on whether the statue could appear at the museum on a long-term basis.²⁸ As Rocky, Stallone’s turf was outside of the museum, on the Rocky Steps and in the ring, but as a Hollywood celebrity he appeared at ease inside the museum on numerous occasions. With the exception of *Rocky* and *Rocky IV*, all of the films in the series premiered in Philadelphia and were celebrated with a private party in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Photographs from one of the opening festivities show Stallone and his wife, both dressed for the black-tie affair, on the *other* prominent staircase associated with the museum. Instead of sprinting up the museum’s exterior steps, Stallone descends the interior ones that give the museum’s Great Stair Hall its name.²⁹ In that moment, celebrity Stallone did not embody Rocky but was his mirror image—the inverse reflection of his famous character. Rather than ascending to potential success, Stallone descended from on high; at the premiere party, the museum was his palace and he was the elite—a far cry from the culturally disenfranchised community that he purported to represent in his endeavor to place the popular Rocky statue permanently at the museum.

So what are we to make of these examples that upset the strict split between snobs and populists, which nevertheless came to characterize the statue debates? Perhaps the pugilistic spirit of the *Rocky* films made it all too tempting for publicists and journalists to transform what could have been a quiet dispute into an all-out (verbal) brawl that required two distinct sides pitted against one another. In fact, nearly every article about the statue included at least one *Rocky*-related pun.³⁰ At the same time, the public nature of the debate may have limited the degree of nuance that emerged from the press coverage of the controversy. The oversimplification of the positions in the *Rocky* debate underscores the need for scholarly accounts of public disputes.

Rocky Reclaimed

The end of the Rocky statue debates in 2006 coincided with two milestones. That year marked the 30th anniversary of *Rocky* and it also brought the conclusion of the epic series of *Rocky* films. *Rocky Balboa*, the sixth and final movie, had been shot during the previous year and would premiere that December. The city's decision to reopen the question of where to display the statue may have been just another component of the 2006 *Rocky* fervor. After all, the statue was unveiled in its new location at Eakins Oval during Philly Loves Rocky Week, a festival that featured a Rocky look-alike contest, exhibition boxing and a screening of the original *Rocky* movie.³¹ The festival took place just three months before *Rocky Balboa*'s release. In deciding to relocate the Rocky statue in late 2006, were Philadelphia's city boards caving to commercialism and pressure from Hollywood publicists? Undoubtedly many of the people who angrily responded to the city's

decision to put *Rocky* at the museum would answer that question with a resounding “yes,” but I offer a less skeptical reading of the *Rocky* saga and its conclusion.³² At the Spectrum, the statue primarily served as a monument to the *Rocky* films and as a popular sports symbol. When the Rocky statue appeared in the press between phases of debate, it was mostly discussed on the pages of the Sports section.³³ The statue may have been iconic while on display at the sports complex, but it was not a city icon. When the city moved the statue to the museum’s grounds it embraced *Rocky* as an image for Philadelphia, not just as a piece of publicity for a film franchise or a convenient reference for sports writers.

More than a space reserved for the fine arts, the area in front of the museum was a place of civic significance. In 1923, a different dispute over public sculpture confirmed that the parkway grounds were to fill this wider-reaching role. Factions in the city “debat[ed] with more heat than ever” whether it was appropriate to install an equestrian statue of George Washington in front of the new museum building, which was under construction at the time.³⁴ Although Washington, who had lived in Philadelphia during his presidency, bore an indisputable connection to the city, some who objected to the statue suggested that a sculpture of a famous American artist would be more fitting in front of the museum than a figure of the nation’s first president.³⁵ Parkway designers, who favored the Washington statue, ultimately won the dispute, and the sculpture of Washington remains in place near the museum today (Figure 2). The resolution of this early twentieth-century controversy implicitly established the grounds outside of the museum as an area for recognizing historically significant aspects of the city, even if they were not directly connected to its legacy of achievements

in visual culture. Generations later, the site retained that purpose. For example, even today, Philadelphia's annual *Welcome America!* Fourth of July celebration culminates with a concert and fireworks in front of the museum. By adding the Rocky statue to the grounds at the end of the parkway, Philadelphia acknowledged the fictional character as significant to the city as a whole.

The conclusion of the *Rocky* series may have prompted the statue's transition from iconic object to city icon. Once there were to be no more installments of *Rocky*, the statue could become associated with Philadelphia's history, rather than with Hollywood's hype. Philadelphians were aware that as long as United Artists continued to churn out *Rocky* movies, the statue and the controversy surrounding its location would build publicity for the films and, in turn, boost box office sales for each new release. Although the city did allow the statue controversy to raise interest in Rocky just months before *Rocky Balboa*'s debut, when the statue's ability to directly promote new *Rocky* movies began to decline it was free to serve a different promotional function. Instead of sparking interest in new episodes of the saga, it could operate as a reminder of Philadelphia's past associations with the movie. In other words, emphasis shifted from the films to the city, and from the present to the past.

In 2006 the city simultaneously embraced and began to move beyond *Rocky*. The transition is illustrated in The Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation's (GPTMC) annual reports from 2007 and 2008. When GPTMC gave an overview of the previous year's publicity initiatives in 2007, it bragged that it had piggy-backed on recent Hollywood projects in the city: "The films *Invincible...* and *Rocky Balboa* allowed us to rev up the marketing machine,

generating 900+ stories about moving the *Rocky* statue and the release of the two films.”³⁶ Just as United Artists may have once used the *Rocky* statue and the Philadelphia-based controversy to draw moviegoers to the *Rocky* films, GPTMC could now brag about using the movies and the statue to attract publicity foremost for the city. GPTMC also explained that “[t]he *Rocky Balboa* story and image is a part of Philadelphia. It is the story of the underdog, of the grit and authenticity of the city, of a city with heart. The crowds at the *Rocky* statue at the foot of the Philadelphia Museum of Art attest to the power and popularity of his story.”³⁷ The practice of associating Rocky with Philadelphia dates back to the 1970s, but in 2007 the bronze sculpture and the crowds it drew offered a tangible indicator of the city’s spirit.

By 2008 the Rocky statue remained in Philadelphia’s marketing, but it had lost some of its prominent role in representing the city. When the tourism report from that year discussed the success of GPTMC’s website, it illustrated its case with a screenshot of gophila.com (now visitphilly.com). The webpage displayed a large horizontal image with a picture that represented one of the many great things that Philadelphia and the countryside could offer tourists. Online the picture changed every few seconds, but the screenshot included in the 2008 *Tourism Monitor* featured a photograph of the Rocky statue.³⁸ No longer explicitly addressed in the report, *Rocky* was an implicit part of the identity that Philadelphia projected.

Although GPTMC continued to promote *Rocky*-related tourism by referring to *Rocky* and the statue in occasional press releases, after 2007 the organization no longer highlighted its *Rocky*-themed publicity endeavors as

evidence of its achievements. Instead, annual reports featured pull-quotes from newspaper and magazine articles that proclaimed that Philadelphia was more than just *Rocky*. In December 2010, the Rocky statue held the number 10 slot on GPTMC's list of "favorite attractions" on the home page of visitphilly.com, but the 2010 annual report placed its emphasis elsewhere.³⁹ It still mentioned the Rocky statue, but it did so by calling attention to a *Bon Appétit* story that hailed the city as "an urban culinary mecca, with good eating as much of a draw as the Liberty Bell, the Rocky Balboa statue, and the diverse culture."⁴⁰

After Philadelphia officially granted the *Rocky* statue city icon status by installing it near the Rocky Steps, the statue supporters may have felt that the city had given adequate credibility to their vision for Philadelphia. Although individuals who opposed permanently displaying the sculpture near the museum may have been disappointed by the outcome of the debates, they did not see their vision for the city ignored in Philadelphia's official publicity endeavors. Instead of celebrating Philadelphia purely for its high culture accomplishments or for its pop culture fame, GPTMC invited potential tourists to experience both sides of the city.

Site Significance

At Eakins Oval the *Rocky* statue should no longer be dismissed as simplistic. When the Rocky statue was first made it was literally a shell of an artwork: a model created to signify "public sculpture" on screen. Over the course of the dispute, as individuals projected their visions of Philadelphia's identity onto the bronze figure, they imbued it with significance and made the sculpture relevant

to the city in new ways. Revisiting the statue in the aftermath of the quarter-century conversation that involved movie fans, lovers of fine art and civic boosters reveals a compelling object.

For those invested in carefully studying artworks like the ones on view inside the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Rocky statue at Eakins Oval offers an engaging exercise in looking and thinking. With its multiplicity of meanings, which communicated most clearly in the contentious environment of the museum, the sculpture can represent the interests of individuals on both sides of the controversy. In that setting, neither atop the stairs nor at the Spectrum, the statue acquired its most intriguing function.

The act of running the Rocky Steps places emphasis on the ascent and the arrival at the top of the platform, but what happens after a Rocky runner turns her back to the museum and raises her arms in celebration as she looks out at the parkway and the city in front of her? Perhaps after posing for a photo-op, she will catch her breath and jog back down the steps to reconvene with friends at the traffic circle below.⁴¹ Relative to the scores of individuals who come to the stairs, remarkably few people sprint up the steps, do their Rocky moves, and then head into the museum to wander the galleries.⁴² Imagine: a runner bounds up the stairs, celebrates his accomplishment, and trots back down to the base of the hill. On his way down, he might pass another set of runners who will follow suit, pausing at the top of the steps for a look out at the skyline before heading back down to street level. With people continually ascending and descending the stairs, a collective body of runners forms. The Rocky Steps become the site of a perpetual up-and-down, like the continual back-and-forth of the discourse over

the appropriate location for the sculpture. In their shadow, the Rocky statue, a fixed monument that offers a contrast to the experiential nature of the steps might seem to halt the repetitive actions of the collective runners nearby and offer a resolution to the controversy.⁴³ A visit to the Rocky statue, however, simply transforms the two-part up-and-down into a three-part triangle of activity, like a conductor switching from 2/4 to 3/4 meter. In this way, the statue's supposedly permanent location at Eakins Oval does not announce a fixed and final vision of Philadelphia, but, instead can signal to viewers that the city and its reputation, perpetually shaped by the conversations that take place in and about the region, remain in flux.

¹ For an overview of the relationship between *Rocky* and Philadelphia, see Laura Holzman, "Rocky," *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*. <http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/rocky/> (accessed 27 Feb. 2014). For a full account of the writing and production process according to *Rocky* lore, see Sylvester Stallone, *The Official Rocky Scrapbook* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1977).

² Television studies scholars have considered the ways in which bronze sculptures of famous TV characters, commissioned by the network TV Land, have shaped local identity in Midwestern cities like Minneapolis and Milwaukee. The case of the Rocky statue differs from these examples because the Rocky statue was part of the fictional world of the movie, whereas the TV Land monuments were created years after the characters they depict became famous. See: Victoria E. Johnson, "'You're Gonna Make It After All!' The Urbane Midwest in MTM Productions' 'Quality' Comedies," in *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 112–146; Michael Z. Newman, "The Bronze Fonz: Public Art/Popular Culture in Milwaukee, Wisconsin," *FlowTV*, 5 Mar. 2010, <http://flowtv.org/2010/03/flow-favorites-the-bronze-fonz-public-artpopular-culture-in-milwaukee-wisconsin-michael-z-newman-university-of-wisconsin-milwaukee/> (accessed 28 February 2014). For a discussion of the ways in which the tourist gaze operates with regard to sites depicted in film and on TV, see John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd), 97–118.

³ The notion that objects take on different roles in physical, temporal and social contexts has shaped a field of study concerning “the lives of objects.” See, for example, Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91.

⁴ Franz Lidz, “Capturing Sport’s Idols with Feats of Clay,” *Sports Illustrated*, 1987: 26. Schomberg’s publicity materials as well as contemporary journalism described the statue’s pose as victorious; many documents refer to the figure’s “classical contrapposto pose.” “Rocky,” *Schomberg Studios*, n.d., http://www.rockysculpture.com/rocky_miniature.html (accessed 10 Sep. 2012). Peter Cooney, “Sly Goes to the Mat for Rocky Statue,” *The Toronto Star*, 28 Feb. 1990: D3 ; Robert Strauss, “‘Rocky’ Statue Makes Comeback at Museum,” *The New York Times*, 19 Nov. 2006: 31 ; Kreilick Conservation, LLC, “Rocky (1981) by A. Thomas Schomberg”, 7 Sep. 2006. Art Commission - Rock ’06, Philadelphia Art Program Office; A. Thomas Schomberg in *Rocky (1980)*, Museum Without Walls (The Fairmount Park Art Association, 2012), <http://museumwithoutwallsaudio.org/interactive-map/rocky#video> (accessed 10 Sep. 2012).

⁵ Founded in 1907, the Art Jury became the Art Commission in 1951 when a new city charter restructured local government and established the Art Commission as a branch of the Department of Public Property. For more information about the Art Commission, see “Art Commission,” *Office of Arts and Culture*, n.d., http://www.phila.gov/visitors/arts_office.html#artcommission (accessed 10 Sep. 2012); “Art Commission,” *City of Philadelphia Department of Records*, n.d., <http://www.phila.gov/phils/docs/inventor/graphics/agencies/A140.htm> (accessed 10 Sep. 2012).

⁶ See for example: Jack Smyth, “Rocky’ Is the Underdog in Fight over Statue at Phila. Art Museum,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 11 Dec. 1980. Statues - Rocky, Evening Bulletin Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁷ Art Gorman qtd. in Fawn Vrazo, “For Art’s Sake: Kensington Man Wages A Lonely Fight For Rocky Statue’s Return,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 9 Aug. 1981, sec. C. Gorman – ART FAN, Evening Bulletin Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁸ Henry S. McNeil, Jr., Letter to Anne d’Harnoncourt, 27 Sep. 1982, Anne d’Harnoncourt Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives; Henry S. McNeil, Jr., “Letter to the Editor” (unpublished, n.d.), Anne d’Harnoncourt Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives.

⁹ Robert Montgomery Scott, Letter to Joseph E. Coleman, 10 Sep. 1981, Marketing and Public Relations Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives.

¹⁰ “Statement on the Removal of the Rocky Statue,” n.d. Marketing and Public Relations Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives.

¹¹ Local art movers donated their resources to help make the price of relocating the statue more affordable for the museum. Robert Montgomery Scott, Letter to Kitty Caparella, 11 Aug. 1982. Anne d’Harnoncourt Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives; Jill M. Bullock, “As an Extra Precaution This Time, the Curator

Has Mr. T. on Retainer,” *Wall Street Journal*, 1990. Marketing and Public Relations Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives ; Anne d’Harnoncourt, Memo to Bob Scott, Gene Kuthy, and Larry Snyder, Re: Rocky, 22 Jul. 1982. Anne d’Harnoncourt Papers, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives.

¹² Initially, given that the Art Commission and the Fairmount Park Commission ruled against the statue’s long-term display in front of the museum, Stallone shipped the statue back to Los Angeles after the *Rocky III* shoot. The Rocky Must Stay campaign began as an effort to return the statue to Philadelphia; the group’s secondary goal was to have the sculpture permanently on view at the Rocky Steps. See, for example, Vrazo.

¹³ Kreilick Conservation, LLC, “Rocky (1981) by A. Thomas Schomberg.” 7 Sep. 2006. Art Commission – Rock ’06. Philadelphia Art Program Office.

¹⁴ Rice, “The ‘Rocky’ Dilemma: Museums, Monuments, and Popular Culture in the Postmodern Era.” In *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy*. Ed. Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster. (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 233.

¹⁵ My discussion of taste preferences and their connection to an individual’s class status and professional background is grounded in the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 56-57.

¹⁶ McNeil, Jr., Letter to Anne d’Harnoncourt.

¹⁷ CC, “The Disgrace of Accepting the Rocky Prop,” email, 10 Sep. 2006. Art Commission - Rock ’06, Philadelphia Art Program Office.

¹⁸ For another example of the points of view discussed in this paragraph, see Editorial, “The Art Museum Isn’t for Hype,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 12 May 1981. Statues - Rocky, Evening Bulletin Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

¹⁹ Sal Vittolino, “A TKO for ‘Rocky’ Two Locations Eyed for Statue,” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 20 Nov. 1981. Statues - Rocky, Evening Bulletin Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

²⁰ Editorial, “Bring the Statue Back,” *Times Northeast*, 20 May 1981. Marketing and Public Relations Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives.

²¹ Nancy Kolb qtd. in Michael Vitez, “Rocky Statue Ready to Hit the Steps; With a Win, the Fictional Pugilist Is Back at His Old Haunt—the Art Museum,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 7 Sep. 2006: B01.

²² For additional discussions of the Rocky Statue as city icon, see Stephanie Naidoff qtd. in Strauss, “‘Rocky’ Statue Makes Comeback at Museum”; and Emanuel Kelly qtd. in Vitez, “Rocky Statue Ready to Hit the Steps.”

²³ Bourdieu, 1984.

²⁴ For example, journalist Brian X. McCrone attributed a vote in favor of placing Rocky at the steps to the fact that “it is undeniably a cultural icon.” Brian X. McCrone, “Rocky’s Home at Art Museum” *Philadelphia Metro*, 2006. Marketing and Public Relations Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

²⁵ For more on film tourism, see Urry, 2010.

²⁶ Frank Luzi, "Nashua Telegraph Column on Rocky Statue and Rocky Fandom," email to Gail Harritty, Charles Croce, Norman Keyes, and Elisabeth Flynn, 24 Aug. 2006. Marketing and Public Relations Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

²⁷ A. Wesley Bryan, "Letter of Agreement with Michael Glick, Rocky V Executive Producer and Production Manager," 18 May 1990, Marketing and Public Relations Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives.

²⁸ See, for example: "Rocky Statue Banned from Museum," *The Washington Post*, 28 Mar. 1990: B6. Cooney, "Sly Goes to the Mat for Rocky Statue." *The Toronto Star*, 28 Feb. 1990: D3.

²⁹ Mort Bond, contact sheet, n.d., Marketing and Public Relations Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives.

³⁰ See, for example: Smyth, "Rocky' Is the Underdog in Fight over Statue at Phila. Art Museum"; Stephan Salisbury, "Comeback for Rocky Statue. A Familiar Arena: The Art Museum," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 May 2006: A01 ; "Art Museum Site for Rocky Statue Takes It on the Chin," *The Associated Press State and Local Wire*, 3 Aug. 2006. Available from LexisNexis Academic www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic (accessed 13 Oct. 2010).

³¹ "'Philly Loves Rocky Week' Honors Sly Stallone: A Week of Rocky-Themed Events to Mark Film's 30th Anniversary" (Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation, 31 Aug. 2006), <http://press.visitphilly.com/releases/philly-loves-rocky-week-honors-sly-stallone> (accessed 12 Oct. 2010).

³² For examples of critics who accused Philadelphia of giving in to unabashed commercialism, see: Anne Fabbri, "The Contrarian: Time for a Change," *Art Matters*, October 2006. Marketing and Public Relations Records, Philadelphia Museum of Art ; Edward J. Sozanski, "Yo, Diana! Rocky's Turn; It's Time the Goddess Tiptoeed down the Grand Stairs Inside the Art Museum. Let a Tough Guy Rise to the Challenge of Making Money for the Arts," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 May 2006: H01.

³³ Bob Brookover, "Adams: Rocky Must Share the Credit," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 May 2002: D05 ; Frank Fitzpatrick, "The New Year of Fun Is Set to Begin," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 3 Jan. 2003: D02 ; Bob Ford, "Inspired Phillies Flying High," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 13 May 2002: D01 .

³⁴ "War on Statue of Washington," *American Art News* (6 Jan. 1923): 3.

³⁵ See Albert Rosenthal, in *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Tourism 2007 Report to the Industry: Marketing Gets Personal* (Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation, 2007), 25.

³⁷ *2007 Greater Philadelphia Tourism Monitor: What's In A Place?*, 2007, 29.

³⁸ *Tourism 2008 Report to the Region: More Partners, More Promotions, More People* (Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation, 2008), 41.

³⁹ "Favorite Attractions," *Philadelphia and the Countryside — Official Visitor Site*, n.d., www.visitphilly.com (accessed 15 Dec. 2010).

⁴⁰ *Tourism 2010: Report to the Region: Worth The Trip* (Greater Philadelphia Tourism and Marketing Corporation, 2010), 30.

⁴¹ In *Rocky Stories*, Vitez recounts several stories that follow this model. Vitez and Gralish, *Rocky Stories*.

⁴² For example Sandra Horrocks in Bullock, “As an Extra Precaution This Time, the Curator Has Mr. T. on Retainer.”

⁴³ For a discussion of the experiential monument, which invites visitors to physically engage with space and memory, see Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 251–295.

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