

Tourist Art: The Dual Identity of Mount Rushmore

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Research Problem

In undertaking this research on Mount Rushmore, I wanted to know how the conflict between the memorial's identity as a work of art and its function as a tourist attraction affected the decisions the artist made concerning the work. Were the artistic decisions his alone, or were they sometimes influenced by other players in the project, who may have had other motivations? I am hypothesizing that, despite artist Gutzon Borglum's insistence that he was motivated only by artistic concerns, and despite the often heated public feuds he had with other participants in the project, the touristic function of the work greatly influenced the decisions he made about the work. In testing this hypothesis, I also hoped to learn how these decisions Borglum made established a successful formula for American tourist art, whatever his motives may have been.

Review of the Research Procedure

I began by identifying five players in the Mount Rushmore project (including the artist) for whom I needed archival material. I located their papers, along with other archival information on Mount Rushmore, at four different locations in South Dakota and Washington, D.C. My trip began at the Library of Congress in Washington, which contains Borglum's papers, along with the papers of the Mount Rushmore National Memorial Commission, the Federal government agency created to manage the money for the Rushmore project. After two full days at the Library of Congress, I flew to South Dakota. My first stop there was the Archives and Special Collections of the University of South Dakota in Vermillion. There I found the papers of Peter Norbeck, a U.S. Senator from South Dakota who was instrumental in passing the legislation creating the national memorial, as well as building the roads to Mount Rushmore. I then went to the South Dakota State Archives in Pierre and looked at the papers of Doane Robinson, the South Dakota State Historian who devised the idea of carving rock

formations in the Black Hills into portraits of historical figures. Finally, I ended my trip at Mount Rushmore itself; the National Park Service maintains a small archive there. While the documents at the archive mostly relate to the history of the park, which was not relevant to my topic, there are also facsimiles of some of Borglum's and Norbeck's papers, which allowed me to find documents that I had missed or overlooked in Washington and Vermillion.

This archival research proved indispensable to my paper; the vast majority of citations in my paper are of archival materials. The fact that my research goes back to primary sources, rather than relying on the research of others, is particularly important for a paper on a work of art that has been written about many times before; the abundance of archival research is an indicator of the freshness of my approach to the topic.

Summary of Findings

I learned very quickly that Borglum was more involved in publicizing Mount Rushmore than I had previously thought. This fact does not, however, contradict his insistence that he was only concerned with the artistic aspect of the work. To him, tourism promotion could be a form of art. Time and again in his correspondence with the other players in the project, he insisted on tourist publicity of the highest class: photographs of the carving with the same aesthetic appeal as the sculpture itself, text in brochures that would help visitors understand the historical significance of the work, scenic roads that would help establish the character of the monument and its environment as they carried the visitor there. He wanted no expense spared in securing this publicity, becoming impatient with anyone who tried to deny him the publicity he wanted.

For Borglum, the work of art extended beyond the monument. He did not think he needed publicity to attract tourists to Mount Rushmore; the carving itself would bring them there. What he wanted to accomplish with the publicity was to influence what visitors thought

about the work. He wanted them to see it the way he saw it, as a monument to American democracy and the pioneering spirit, and as a work of art.

Conclusion

I am this week submitting my paper for publication in *American Studies*, the journal of the Mid-America American Studies Association (MAASA). I am sending a copy of that paper along with this report. I have high hopes that *American Studies* will publish this article, as I presented a paper on colossal sculpture of the Dakotas at the MAASA conference last spring. If I am successful in publishing this paper, I may look to combine the material gleaned from this project with previous research on colossal sculpture in the Dakotas (and some future research) to write a book on the subject. My paper ends with a discussion of the contribution of Mount Rushmore to the development of a visual tourist culture in the Dakotas, asserting the possibility of further publication.