

# HOW DID THAT PUBLIC ART GET THERE?



Cabbagetown mural, Atlanta

Whether making plans with friends — “We’ll meet you by the statue” — or describing why you love your neighborhood, few things define sense of place in the same way as public art. But defining just what constitutes “public art” can be complicated.

According to *A Planners Dictionary*, public art is “any visual work of art displayed for two weeks or more in an open city-owned area, on the exterior of any city-owned facility, within any city-owned facility in areas designated as public area, lobbies, or public assembly areas, or on non-city property if the work of art is installed, financed, either wholly or in part, with funds or grants procured by the city.”

From *PublicArtArchive.org*: “Works of art that are commissioned, gifted or granted by corporations, museums, educational institutions, private parties and other entities for the purpose of being presented in public spaces for the benefit of the public. Such works must be permanently installed, but in some limited instances be allowed to be portable and/or temporary, provided their fundamental feature is that they are intended to be readily viewed by the public.”

From *Wikipedia*: “The term public art refers to art of any media that have been planned and executed with the specific intention of being staged in the physical public domain, usually outside and accessible to all.”

In short, when it comes to defining public art, a picture truly is worth a thousand words.

The metro Atlanta region has a wealth of public art displays that enrich the communities in which we live. But just as importantly, the region boasts public art that tells a different story about how it was created.

Beltline mural, Atlanta



Oakland Cemetery memorials in landscape, Atlanta







Carnegie Library Columns Monument, Atlanta



Stone Mountain granite marker, Stone Mountain



Julian Hoke Smith carvings, Decatur



Olympic wayfinding, Atlanta



#### HISTORIC ARTIFACTS:

##### Carnegie Library Columns

The City of Atlanta's first public library was a Carnegie Library, opened in 1902. This building served as the main library until 1977, when it was torn down and replaced with the current building. The building's architectural bays were preserved as a monument to higher education in Atlanta and installed as public art at the intersection of Peachtree Street NE and Baker Street NW in downtown Atlanta.

#### SCULPTURAL CARVINGS:

##### First National Bank of Atlanta, Decatur Branch/Decatur Starbucks

Located at 133 Court Square East in Decatur, this branch of the First National Bank of Atlanta was designed by architect Francis P. Smith. The façade is particularly unique because of carvings by Atlanta architect and sculptor Julian Hoke Smith. The building was completed in 1950 and the carvings in 1951. Julian Smith's most notable work was probably President Jimmy Carter's official inauguration medallion in 1977, but his work can also be seen on the State Agriculture Building and State Office Building.

#### WAYFINDING:

##### The Olympic Legacy

When the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games came to Atlanta, a variety of public and private funds were used to make civic and streetscape improvements prior to the games. Perhaps the most lasting monument to the event is Centennial Olympic Park, with its Fountain of Rings and Quilt of Remembrance, both notable works of public art in and of themselves. But a short distance away from the park, near the Civic Center MARTA Station, is a piece of public art that also doubles as public wayfinding. Titled *Ex-Static* by Maria Artemis, this piece "...was intentionally built within an urban landscape to ease pedestrian direction and circulation by acting as a link between the Civic Center MARTA Station and the Civic Center." The Civic Center is still part of Atlanta's urban fabric, but SciTrek, the community's former science museum, has long been shuttered.

#### MONUMENTS AND MEMORIALS:

##### Marietta National Cemetery, Historic Oakland Cemetery and Stone Mountain Cemetery

Imbued with meaning and symbolism, cemeteries have historically been places of remembrance, reflection and celebration. The pictures on the tombstones and the design of the monuments convey messages to generations of visitors. The grounds of cemeteries themselves are often elegant works of landscape architecture, conveying solemnity, dignity and respite. Everything within cemeteries – often even the choices of flowers, shrubs and trees – has some level of meaning that can be traced back for centuries.



Former Douglas County Courthouse,  
Douglasville



**ARCHITECTURE:**  
Douglas County Museum

Perhaps the largest collection of public art in any community is its architecture. Each building has a style, and a basic architectural vocabulary will tell you much about the when and why of its construction. Whether the vision of an internationally famous architect, or prefabricated and ordered from a catalog, architecture as public art can be expressed from the individual museum property to a large-scale cultural district. Architecture can be both inspiring and challenging. It can also be a source of civic and individual pride.

The former County Courthouse in Douglas County tells an interesting story. Many of Georgia’s courthouses date to the 19th century, but after Douglas County’s historic courthouse burned, the community opted for a thoroughly modern structure. Reports from the day talk of the pride felt by the community for their new structure. In 1956, a special bond for the construction of the courthouse was overwhelmingly supported, and “...in two years, like a breath of fresh air, there emerged a building of modern utilitarian structure that set the spirit of the new age that has come upon the county.” The building uses a mix of traditional and modern materials, including glass, aluminum, porcelain, marble and granite, and now serves as a museum commemorating the history of the community.



WPA Mural by Louis Henri Jean Charlot, McDonough

Instinctual Center by Asron Hussey, Suwanee



**COMMEMORATIVE:**  
WPA Murals – City of McDonough Old Post Office

During the 1930s and 1940s, visual art was a part of the government’s program of getting America back to work. Thousands of posters, paintings and murals were created as a part of the New Deal art programs. Examples can be seen in public buildings around the region, such as post offices, courthouses and city halls. In the Old McDonough Post Office is a mural painted in 1942 entitled Cotton Gin Mill by New Deal artist Louis Henri Jean Charlot (1898-1979). Other examples of New Deal art can be found in post offices in College Park, Conyers and Decatur. A New Deal mural that was formerly in the Lawrenceville Post Office was relocated to Athens.

Iron Canopy by Phil Proctor, Suwanee



**VISIONARY:**  
City of Suwanee Public Art

The City of Suwanee has incentivized the development of public art through a local ordinance. This is premised on the belief that the “...inclusion of art in development projects is viewed as having legitimacy of purpose and common good comparable to architectural standards, landscaping requirements or zoning restrictions already enforced by the City.” Or, stated another way, that public art is a legitimate use of policy to protect the welfare of the city at large. That is a bold position and it has resulted in bold civic spaces and a desirable quality of life enjoyed by Suwanee residents.



# WHY

## Does Public Art Go Away?

Even though public art is an important part of any community, most pieces don't last forever. Whether by the hand of nature or of man, most public art eventually goes away. Because the elements are out of our hands, let's look at some of the reasons that citizens fail to maintain public art or choose to remove it.

Noguchi Playscapes, Atlanta



Site of the former Wyland Whaling Wall, Atlanta

### **LOST:** Wyland Whaling Wall

*Painted in 1993 on the side of a parking garage near Underground Atlanta, the Wyland Whaling Wall was removed in 2010 to allow for maintenance on the building. The mural had deteriorated over time, and the Wyland Foundation expressed no interest in repainting the mural after the repairs to the building were complete. At the time the mural was installed, the artist agreed to maintain it for a period of 10 years, but made no plans for maintenance beyond 10 years.*

### **ALMOST LOST:** Noguchi Playscapes Installation

*Not just for kids, this art was originally installed in Piedmont Park in the 1970s as a gift from the High Museum to the City of Atlanta. By the early 2000s, the geometric playground had fallen into disrepair. Parents expressed concerns about safety, wear, vandalism and disuse. The city considered removing the installation. An art appraisal in 2007 revealed that the playscapes' value was far beyond recreational, and the work quickly became the crown jewel of Atlanta's public art collection. Substantial rehabilitation was undertaken, including safety upgrades, and a new generation has since discovered the thrill and delight of these structures.*

### **ENGAGEMENT:** The Importance of Public Dialogue

*A mural completed by Hyuro in 2012 depicted a woman in various states of undress, which stirred significant conversation and controversy among neighborhood groups. Ultimately, the mural was removed as a result of vandalism that used profanity to express dissatisfaction with the image.*

*A second mural featuring a creature that was half human/ half alligator also stirred controversy in the community for imagery that was thought to be offensive. However, beyond this there were issues of ownership of the wall on which it was painted, and whether proper permits were obtained from the city at the time of installation. Ultimately, it was decided that the Georgia Department of Transportation owns the wall, and they did not give permission for its use as a mural, so the site was painted over.*

*In both instances, it seems artists installed the murals without any process for visioning or communication with the neighborhood, which could have prevented some of the misunderstandings around the imagery or intent of the art and led to art in which the community and the artist could be proud.*

*Other contributing factors:*

- Poor/ incomplete inventory of what a community owns
- Theft or loss of portable items
- Lack of awareness of the significance of certain items
- Lack of resources for maintenance and repair