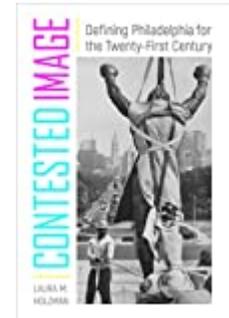




Laura M. Holzman. *Contested Image: Defining Philadelphia for the Twenty-First Century.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019. xi + 198 pp. \$99.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4399-1587-5.



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With *Contested Image*, Laura Holzman traces how three icons—the Barnes Foundation art collection, Thomas Eakins’s *The Gross Clinic* (1875), and the bronze sculpture of fictional boxer Rocky Balboa, from the film *Rocky III* (1982)—became “pictures for the city” of Philadelphia. The book builds upon her curatorial experience in place-based contemporary art projects and culls together editorials, letters, blog posts, correspondence, and other artifacts of public discourse, as well as her own personal experience living in Philadelphia during a time of intense cultural debate in the early 2000s. The very public debates surrounding the relocation of these objects imbued them with new meaning, Holzman argues, fusing them with the identity of the city itself. The book links together conversations in art history with public history, urban history, and visual culture and points to the ways in which such images and objects can gain new significance in the wake of contemporary cultural debates.

Holzman’s story begins with a sweeping introduction to Philadelphia’s history over the past 250

years: from the center of political life in the late colonial and early national period to its fall from prominence in the nineteenth century as other East Coast cities grew their populations and industry. By the twentieth century, local boosters stressed the importance of Philadelphia’s cultural institutions, a sensibility that continued to shape the city’s identity and figured heavily in urban renewal efforts during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

This context of urban renewal and redevelopment frames the book’s middle chapters, which tackle each icon in case-study fashion. Financial troubles around the year 2000 prompted the trustees of the Barnes Foundation to consider relocating the prestigious art collection from its 1925 Beaux-Arts mansion on a quiet, residential street in Merion, PA, to downtown Philadelphia. By this time the Barnes collection had gained international acclaim and, in some ways, outgrown its secluded suburban location. A prolonged public and legal debate ensued over the next decade as many argued for the site-specificity of the collection—includ-

ing the importance of keeping it in the suburbs—while others pointed to issues of public access and its potential to promote much-needed tourism to the city. Such debates, Holzman argues, shaped the design of the new downtown building: its architectural features “reflected the [now] public orientation of the collection” while the landscape designs showed continuity with the Merion location (p. 70). Holzman asserts that these public arguments about the importance of the collection and its ties to the city transformed the Barnes collection into a signifier for the city itself, an icon which Philadelphians adopted to frame their city’s identity as a premier site for cultural engagement in the twenty-first century.

Like the relocation of the Barnes collection, a 2006 proposal to sell Eakins’s painting to an out-of-state buyer resulted in intense public debate. But in this case, Philadelphians rallied together to keep *The Gross Clinic* in the city. This chapter articulates the book’s argument most clearly and is the most compelling case study of the three. Again, Holzman argues that public discourse transformed the painting into a “city icon that played a crucial role in negotiating Philadelphia’s reputation” at the time (p. 77). Yet rather than international acclaim, as was the case with the Barnes collection, Holzman points to the private significance of *The Gross Clinic*—that is, individuals’ private memories of the painting on display, and the intersections of those memories with visions of Philadelphia—as the mitigating factor that made the painting an iconic image for the city. At a time when Philadelphia was attempting to rebrand its public image, saving *The Gross Clinic* enabled Philadelphians to demonstrate their commitment to high culture. They redefined Philadelphia as a “sophisticated metropolis” whose cultural resources and institutions were highly valued by residents (p. 78). Philadelphia thus pivoted from its twentieth-century image as a crime-ridden, postindustrial wasteland to a world-class cultural center for the twenty-first century. As Holzman notes, saving Eakins’s painting helped to reassert Philadelphia’s “significance

as a place with superb medical facilities, top-notch museums with world-class conservation teams, and audiences who cared deeply about the art on display in their city” (p. 97).

Philadelphians may have been confident about the significance of *The Gross Clinic*, but they wrestled with what to do with the Rocky statue from the first moment of its arrival in the city. Sylvester Stallone donated the sculpture to the city in the early 1980s after filming *Rocky III*, proposing that the statue be placed at the top of the east steps to the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), as is pictured in the films. While many fans agreed, others objected to the inclusion of an object from commercial pop culture on such sacred high-brow ground. Holzman argues that the ongoing arguments over the proper placement of the statue—from the city’s sports complex to the PMA steps to the Eakins Oval just adjacent to the PMA (its current home)—revolved around changing notions of *which* cultural achievements were acceptable to serve as representations for the city. In other words, the Rocky statue facilitated a broader debate about the relative value of high culture versus popular culture to the city’s public image. Tracing these discussions, Holzman points to the interconnected nature of the film’s popularity, public appropriations of Rocky’s iconic climb to the top of the steps, and the changing views of city leaders and cultural institutions. By the early 2000s, Philadelphians had grown accustomed to the underdog spirit embodied by the Rocky character, causing the film’s tale of perseverance-despite-adversity to resonate with the city’s rebranding efforts and shifting identity.

Throughout the text, Holzman provides convincing evidence that by 2010 these three objects gained iconic status and were intrinsically linked to Philadelphia’s public image. An art historian by training, Holzman skillfully incorporates compelling visual analyses into her text, particularly of *The Gross Clinic* and the Rocky statue. Her rendering defines visual culture very broadly—and, I

think, successfully—by invoking the site-specificity of visual meaning. She thus provides important new directions for historians studying visual culture. Yet there were moments when additional attention to context, especially the culture wars of the 1990s and Philadelphia’s history of racial tensions, would have strengthened her argument. Matthew Frye Jacobson, in *Roots Too* (2006), has given a superb reading of the *Rocky* series as a call to working-class whites who, in the wake of deindustrialization and civil rights agitation, felt disempowered and left out of the national conversation. In Jacobson’s view, Rocky’s story gave working-class whites a new hero, who redeemed white masculinity for the post-civil rights era. While Holzman carefully notes the city’s efforts at urban renewal and revitalization early in the book, she does not reconnect this context to the icons she digests in later chapters, nor does she fully explain *why* the city needed to rebrand itself. Implicit here is the postindustrial reality of dilapidated buildings, crime, and poverty that riddled many American cities in the 1970s and 1980s, and, of course, the connection in popular consciousness between these unsavory aspects of the city and the people of color who lived there. Rereading Holzman’s subjects through this lens, one might argue that they become not just icons for the city of Philadelphia, but implicitly icons for white culture. The Barnes collection points to the city’s storied high-brow past, when white elites became the custodians of high culture and education. *The Gross Clinic* evokes the city’s historically prominent (and white) medical colleges while the Rocky statue gestures to the white working-class “underdogs” of the postindustrial era. Repositioning these three objects as icons for the city might have allowed whites to symbolically *reclaim* the city. Was this reinvention of the city’s image really just a white-washing, and perhaps an effort to detour the city’s identity away from its historical connections to African American culture? In particular, I wondered how the successes of 1990s hip-hop artists such as DJ Jazzy Jeff, the Fresh Prince, and Boyz II

Men might have figured into the desire to rebrand the city a decade later. Finally, the public’s embrace of the Rocky statue, often in direct defiance of high-brow tastemakers, seems to parallel the broader threads of anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism percolating in national culture at the time. Situating the Rocky statue within these two contexts—race relations and the culture wars—could provide a rich opportunity to understand how race and class may have intertwined in this moment, structuring the conversations about which culture (and whose culture) was and is most worthy of the city’s celebration and adoption for its rebranded public image.

Holzman has written a provocative text that raises important questions and thus provides ample new avenues for research. As a meditation on the place of visual culture in the contemporary urban environment, it is, despite these criticisms, widely successful. Most importantly, Holzman reminds us of the impermanence and contingency surrounding urban icons and identities. She smartly navigates between public discourse and academic discussions, providing a well-evidenced and accessible narrative that is sure to promote further inquiry on these fascinating intersections between visual culture, urban studies, and Pennsylvania history.

With *Contested Image*, Laura Holzman traces how three icons—the Barnes Foundation art collection, Thomas Eakins’s *The Gross Clinic* (1875), and bronze sculpture of the fictional boxer, Rocky Balboa, from the film *Rocky III* (1982)—became “pictures for the city” of Philadelphia. The book builds upon her curatorial experience in place-based contemporary art projects, and culls together editorials, letters, blog posts, correspondence, and other artifacts of public discourse, as well as her own personal experience living in Philadelphia during a time of intense cultural debate in the early 2000s. The very public debates surrounding the relocation of these objects imbued them with new

meaning, Holzman argues, fusing them the identity of the city itself. The book links together conversations in art history with public history, urban history, and visual culture, and points to the ways in which such images and objects can gain new significance in the wake of contemporary cultural debates.

Holzman's story begins with a sweeping introduction to Philadelphia's history over the past 250 years: from the center of political life in the late-colonial and early national period to its fall from prominence in the nineteenth century as other east-coast cities grew their populations and industry. By the twentieth century, local boosters stressed the importance of Philadelphia's cultural institutions, a sensibility that continued to shape the city's identity and figured heavily in urban renewal efforts during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

This context of urban renewal and redevelopment frames the book's middle chapters, which tackle each icon in case-study fashion. Financial troubles around the year 2000 prompted the trustees of the Barnes Foundation to consider relocating the prestigious art collection from its 1925 Beaux-Arts mansion on a quiet, residential street in Merion, PA, to downtown Philly. By this time the Barnes collection had gained international acclaim, and had, in some ways, outgrown its secluded suburban location. A prolonged public and legal debate ensued over the next decade, as many argued for the site-specificity of the collection—includ-

ing the importance of keeping it in the suburbs—while others pointed to issues of public access and the growing importance of tourism to the city. Such debates, Holzman argues, shaped the design of the new downtown building: its architectural features “reflected the [now] public orientation of the collection,” while the landscape designs showed continuity with the Merion location (p. 70). These public arguments about the importance of the collection and its ties to the city allowed the Barnes collec-

tion to become a signifier for the city itself, an icon which Philadelphians adopted to frame their city's identity as a premier site for cultural engagement in the twenty-first century.

Like the Barnes collection, a 2006 proposal to sell Eakins's painting to a buyer out of state resulted in intense public debate, but in this case, Philadelphians rallied together to keep *The Gross Clinic* in the city. This chapter articulates the book's argument most clearly, and is the most compelling case study. Again, Holzman argues that public discourse transformed the painting into a “city icon that played a crucial role in negotiating Philadelphia's reputation” at the time (p. 77). Yet rather than international acclaim, Holzman points to private significance—that is, individuals' memories of the painting on display—as the mitigating factor that made the painting an iconic image for the city. At a time when the city had been attempting to rebrand its public image, saving *The Gross Clinic* enabled Philadelphians to demonstrate their commitment to high culture. They redefined Philadelphia as a “sophisticated metropolis” whose cultural resources and institutions were highly valued by residents (p. 78). Philadelphia pivoted from its twentieth-century image as a crime-ridden, post-industrial wasteland to a world-class cultural center for the twenty-first century. Saving Eakins's painting helped to reassert Philadelphia's “significance as a place with superb medical facilities, top-notch museums with world-class conservation teams, and audiences who cared deeply about the art on display in their city” (p. 97).

Philadelphians may have been confident about *The Gross Clinic*, but they wrestled with what to do with the Rocky statue from the first moment of its arrival in the city. Sylvester Stallone donated the sculpture to the city in the early 1980s after filming *Rocky III*, proposing that the statue be placed at the top of the east steps to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, as is pictured in the films. While many fans agreed, others objected to the inclusion of an object from commercial pop culture

on such sacred high-brow ground. Holzman argues that the ongoing arguments over the proper placement of the statue—from the city’s sports complex, to the PMA steps, to the Eakins Oval just adjacent to the PMA (its current home)—revolved around changing notions of *which* cultural achievements were acceptable to serve as representations for the city. Holzman points to the interconnected nature of the film’s popularity, public appropriations of Rocky’s iconic climb to the top of the steps, and the changing views of city leaders and cultural institutions. By the early 2000s, Philadelphians had grown accustomed to the underdog spirit embodied in the Rocky character, causing the film’s tale of perseverance-despite-adversity to resonate with the city’s rebranding efforts and shifting identity.

Throughout the text, Holzman provides convincing evidence that these three objects gained iconic status linked to Philadelphia’s public image by 2010. An art historian by training, Holzman skillfully incorporates compelling visual analyses into her text, particularly of *The Gross Clinic* and the Rocky statue. Her rendering defines visual culture very broadly—and, I think, successfully—by invoking the site-specificity of visual meaning. She thus provides important new directions for historians studying visual culture. Yet there were moments when additional attention to context—especially the culture wars of the 1990s, and Philadelphia’s history of racial tensions—would have strengthened her argument. Matthew Frye Jacobson, in *Roots Too* (2006), has given a superb reading of the *Rocky* series as a call to working-class whites who, in the wake of de-industrialization and Civil Rights agitation, felt disempowered and left out of the national conversation. While Holzman carefully notes the city’s efforts at urban renewal and revitalization in the early 2000s early in the book, she doesn’t reconnect this context to the icons she digests in later chapters, nor does she fully explain *why* the city needed to rebrand itself. Implicit here is the post-industrial reality of dilapidated buildings, crime, and poverty that riddled

many American cities in the 1970s and 1980s, and, of course, the connection, in popular consciousness, between these unsavory aspects of the city and the people of color who lived there. To reread Holzman’s subjects through this lens, one might argue that they become not just icons for the city of Philadelphia, but implicitly icons for white culture. The Barnes collection points to the city’s high-brow white elites of the early twentieth century, *The Gross Clinic* to the city’s historically prominent (and white) medical colleges, and the Rocky statue gestures to the white working-class “underdogs” of the post-industrial era. Repositioning these as icons for the city might have allowed whites to symbolically *reclaim* the city. Was this reinvention of the city’s image really just a whitewashing? Was it part of an effort to scrub away the “urban decay” of the late twentieth century, as well as Philly’s reputation for African American culture, whose popularity might have most recently been embodied through the success of hip-hop musicians such as DJ Jazzy Jeff, the Fresh Prince, and Boyz II Men? Holzman’s voice is absent on these questions. Moreover, the public’s embrace of the Rocky statue, often in direct defiance of high-brow tastemakers, seems to parallel the broader threads of anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism percolating in national culture at the time. Situating the Rocky statue within these two contexts—race relations and the culture wars—could provide an opportunity to understand how race and class may have intertwined in this moment, structuring the conversations about which culture (and whose culture) was / is most worthy of the city’s celebration and adoption for its rebranded public image.

These omissions notwithstanding, Holzman has crafted a provocative meditation on the place of visual culture in the contemporary urban environment. Importantly, Holzman reminds us of the impermanence and contingency surrounding urban icons and identities. She smartly navigates between public discourse and academic discussions, providing a well-evidenced and accessible narra-

tive that is sure to promote further inquiry on these fascinating intersections between visual culture, urban studies, and Pennsylvania history.

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