Monuments: Commemoration and Controversy explores public monuments as flashpoints of longstanding debates over national identity, politics, and race. Offering a historical foundation for understanding today’s controversies, the exhibition features fragments of a statue of King George III torn down by American Revolutionaries, a souvenir replica of a bulldozed monument by Harlem Renaissance sculptor Augusta Savage, and a maquette of New York City’s first public monument to a Black woman (Harriet Tubman), among other objects from the Museum’s collection. The exhibition reveals how monument-making and monument-breaking have long shaped American life as public statues have been celebrated, attacked, protested, altered, and removed.

Joseph Wilton (1722–1803)
**William Pitt, the Elder, First Earl of Chatham (1708–1778),** ca. 1770
Marble
New-York Historical Society, Gift of Mr. Simon F. Mackie, 1864.5

*It was likely British soldiers who beheaded this monument and broke off its arms. New York colonists had installed the statue at the intersection of William and Wall Streets to honor William Pitt, the English statesman who had helped repeal the Stamp Act. After the British took possession of New York City during the Revolutionary War, they symbolically executed this friend of the colonists.*

Joseph Wilton (1722–1803)
**Horse’s tail from the equestrian statue of King George III,** 1770–1776
Lead
New-York Historical Society, Museum purchase, 1878.6

*On July 9, 1776, after listening to a public reading of the Declaration of Independence, New York colonists marched toward the larger-than-life gilded-lead*
equestrian monument to King George III in Bowling Green and, in an act of symbolic overthrow, pulled it from its pedestal. Revolutionaries melted the monument into musket balls to be used by the Continental Army. A few fragments, like the horse’s tail, escaped the bullet mold. They were stolen back by Loyalists to the King.

Johannes Adam Simon Oertel (1823–1909)
Pulling Down the Statue of King George III, New York City, ca. 1852–1853
Oil on canvas
New-York Historical Society, Gift of Samuel Verplanck Hoffman, 1925.6

This painting points to the hypocrisy of the American Revolution. It describes the patriots’ fight for liberty, as they tear down a monument to King George III and the tyranny it represented. Yet among the crowd, Oertel includes those denied liberty: women, a Black man, and an Indigenous family. He painted the event decades after the fact, as the United States continued to deny women the right to vote, practice slavery, and pursue the strategic and violent displacement of Indigenous peoples.

Augusta Savage (1892–1962)
Lift Every Voice and Sing, ca. 1939
White metal cast with a black patina
New-York Historical Society, Coaching Club Acquisition Fund, 2019.90

The only commission at the 1939 New York World’s Fair by a Black woman artist, Augusta Savage’s 16-foot monument to Black music was seen by more than 5 million visitors and was one of the most popular works on display. Yet Savage lacked the funds to cast the plaster monument in bronze and store it. As a result, her work was demolished during the fair’s cleanup and survives only through small-scale souvenir replicas like the one seen here. Inspired by the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the sculpture takes the form of a harp: 12 young singers wear robes whose folds become the strings of the harp and stand in the hand of God.
Alison Saar (b. 1956)
*Maquette for Swing Low: Harriet Tubman Memorial*, 2007
Bronze
New-York Historical Society, Purchase, 2009.34

This is a model for New York City’s first public monument to a Black woman. Installed in Harlem in 2008, Saar’s sculpture celebrates the abolitionist who escaped slavery in 1849 and made an estimated 13 trips back to Maryland to lead others toward freedom. Saar likens Tubman to the Underground Railroad. She strides forward with the force of a locomotive. Her petticoat forms the front grate of a train, and on her skirt ride those she helped escape from bondage.

Barbara Chase-Riboud (b. 1939)
*Maquette (Sojourner Truth Monument)*, 1999
Bronze
Purchase, 2007.13

This model for a never-realized monument honors Sojourner Truth, who escaped slavery in 1826 to become a prominent abolitionist and women’s rights activist. Truth takes her place in an equestrian monument tradition usually reserved for white male statesmen. She does not ride her horse, however, but leads it while holding a lantern. She appears less to command than to seek, even as she brings light into a dark world.