

“A Masterpiece of Misinterpretation”: The Atlanta Cyclorama’s Vacillating Metamorphosis from Public History to Propaganda (and Back Again)
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Since the June 2015 mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, where a white supremacist murdered nine African American parishioners, the decades-long cultural debate surrounding the conflicting interpretations of Civil War iconography has intensified and led to a variety of changes in symbolic representations honoring the Confederacy. While some of these changes have struck a re-contextualizing middle ground, most petitions for alterations – such as statuary removals, school name changes, memorial re-messagings – have played out within an “all or nothing” binary where some have been taken down in totality and others remain wholly unaltered in bureaucratic protective perpetuity.

Standing in contrast to this rigid standard is the Atlanta Cyclorama, an impressive feat of artistic achievement that has maintained a complexly fluid existence as both a pro-Union attraction of public history and a pro-Confederate artifact of propaganda. Debuting in 1886 in Minneapolis, MN, this colossal oil painting – currently on display at the Atlanta History Center in Atlanta, GA – stands 49 feet tall, stretches 371 feet long, and weighs almost 10,000 pounds. Built to be experienced in an enveloping, 360-degree spectacle, the panoramic painting depicts the Battle of Atlanta, a decisive and important Union victory taking place on July 22, 1864 that not only helped set the stage for Sherman’s notorious “March to the Sea” but also boosted Union morale throughout the Northern states in a way that contributed mightily to Lincoln’s re-election later that November.

What makes the Atlanta Cyclorama so historically significant is its two interwoven narrative threads, one of existence and one of evolution. First, the panoramic painting itself – one of only two remaining of its kind on display in the United States – is an awe-inspiring artistic statement. Crafted by over a dozen German painters in Milwaukee, WI, it is a crowning reminder of an antiquated traveling entertainment medium that was extremely popular before the advent of filmmaking and also a striking testament to endurance as an attraction in the present day. Second, as the painting traveled south in its early years (it debuted in Minneapolis, spent time in Indianapolis and Chattanooga, and finally landed in Atlanta), it evolved and shifted meanings in surprising ways. Along its journey, it was repainted to (1) add an 1888 presidential candidate hopeful, (2) change Confederate prisoners of war to Union deserters, (3) incorporate 15 additions of the iconic Confederate battle flag and a dozen extra Rebel soldiers, (4) insert a Union flag ground into the mud, along with many other modifications meant to stir Southern sympathies and promote the false narratives of Lost Cause mythology.

When the City of Atlanta decided in 2014 to relocate the Atlanta Cyclorama to its new home at the Atlanta History Center (where it reopened in February of this year), they also decided to restore the painting back to its original artistic intentions by reversing the many alterations and distortions that had been applied to its canvas over the previous 130 years. They also decided to create an additional section of the exhibit that details how the painting has been used (and misused) in its various and conflicting interpretations of the past. My paper will argue that the complicated evolutions of our country’s racial narratives are poetically reflected in microcosm via the simultaneously complicated evolution of the Atlanta Cyclorama and also that these symbolic portrayals of power are often erroneously framed as merely monuments of history. To achieve this, I will be partnering with the Atlanta History Center to access their Atlanta Cyclorama archive and also with the City of Atlanta’s Mayor’s Office of Cultural Affairs regarding all documentation surrounding the decision that facilitated the 2014 move to the Atlanta History Center and its subsequent re-contextualization.