

The Editorial Notebook

Fame Is a Bust

Fame is hollow and fame is fleeting, we are told from childhood, but in at least one case it has also run out of cash. There are no longer any funds to maintain the Hall of Fame — the Stanford White colonnade containing the busts of great men—on the former Bronx campus of New York University, now occupied by CUNY. The future is dubious for 97 distinguished Americans with names like Audubon, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Bryant and Lincoln, immortalized by some equally illustrious American sculptors, including Augustus St. Gaudens, Malvina Hoffman and Daniel Chester French. The marble likenesses fill a 520-foot-long, semicircular granite arcade built in 1901 atop a high cliff with a notable view at the western edge of the campus.

But immortality, like fame, is a sometime thing, and so are neighborhoods. Like other residents of changing areas, the immortals may have to move on, provided that someone wants them and can pay the costs, because joint financing by N.Y.U. and CUNY has come to an end. And so has an era—a time when greatness was measured by art, literature and statesmanship; when fame was tied to honor and glory and pedestals and plaques.

The problem on that hilltop is not just money; it is that its heroes are out of style. Today, fame is a media event, a national phenomenon of in-



stant replay. The virtues of rock and sports stars are measured in cash. Fame is celebrity, and the network insult on TV.

The heroes of history — inventors, artists, patriots—cannot even be recycled like old buildings; there is no scale of values on which to measure them any more. Horatio Alger is quaint; the hero on horseback is charmingly absurd; even Superman, who conquered all, is cliché. In this age of the anti-hero, we honor, if that is the word, life's fall guy, or the man who made it not by perseverance but by beating the system. It's a lonely place up there on that Bronx hilltop, in more ways than one.

But yesterday's heroes are not totally without champions, and a committee headed by the National Sculpture Society is seeking to save the illustrious personages uptown. The Curator of the United States Capitol is considering adding the busts to the national collection in Washington. At least one Football Hall of Fame has expressed interest in acquiring the statues for, one assumes, a more ecumenical pantheon. There is talk, unofficially, of putting them in the World Trade Center lobby; one can only note that classical busts amid the purple carpets and pseudo-Gothic trim would establish a new low in high camp.

The misguided objective is to treat the Hall of Fame as a tourist attraction, as if its only value is in its potential head count. This is not just a lineup of statues; they are an integral part of a substantial and elegant architectural setting and a spectacular site. The Hall of Fame is an environmental and esthetic whole. Dismantling and dismembering a landmark is less than an ideal solution.

But if it must be done, then suitability should be the criterion for relocation. In that event, what will be lost by the move is more than a 76-year-old monument, done in by the vicissitudes of neighborhood change and university financing. Ideals crumble with landmarks, and not only fame, but art, is fleeting.

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