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PC, but not too PC by Tommie Howell

[print version](#)

[Editor's Letter](#) | [Letters to the Editor](#) |
[Beginners' Corner](#) | [Artist Interview:](#)
[James Lehman](#) | [The Tools We Use](#) |
[Video Review: Judith Skinner](#) |
[Holiday Wish List](#) | [Using Paper](#)
[Punches](#) | [Easy Greeting Cards](#) |
[Christmas Candy Canes](#) | [Elements](#)
[of Polymer Clay](#) | [Polymer Covered](#)
[Push-Pins](#) | [Issues in the Crafting](#)
[World](#) | [Email Us!](#) | [Home](#)

Value of Public Art

It's great to be back after my hiatus! Now that I am settled after my move, I am getting the creative juices going again. I was happy to attend my first meeting of the Kentucky-Tennessee Area Polymer Clay Guild. It seems so strange to walk out of my apartment and see Louisville, Kentucky, rather than Seattle, Washington.

It is a bit strange perhaps that my first article, after my move from the Pacific Northwest, is sparked by an event very near my recent hometown. In a moment, I am going to take you to the city of Edmonds, Washington. You see, a crime has been committed. I am going to examine that crime with you, but first I must set the stage for you.

I have long had a love/hate relationship with public art installations. Okay, I admit it; it's mainly a hate relationship. When I lived in Lawrence, Kansas, I was so put off by the pieces that our city fathers chose to purchase that I took action. I started the Lawrence Crap Crawl. This was much like a pub-crawl, in that we stopped and had a beer or something at every bar along the main street.

What made it different is that we stopped at each piece of... well... art (cough) that we passed and we made commentary. I had brochures in which I had given the pieces new names.

These names, I felt, were more in keeping with the actual visual impact of the piece. Some examples: Embattled Soldier became Rusted Ford Undercarriage. The Seed became Malt-O-Meal and Tang having been excreted upon a pedestal by an Elephant. You get the idea.

I feel I was fair. The pieces that were good got good reviews. We had a great time, but it was a sad thing as well. These pieces represented tax dollars spent on items that were quite outside the accessibility of the average resident of a Kansas town... no matter how liberal the town was for Kansas.

I have been amazed at the pieces that I have seen installed around the country. I have developed some ideas about these works. My first admonition to those buying art for public display is that BIG does not equal GOOD.

Other basic warnings are:

- Rust does not mean antique.
- Welded automobile parts are not, in and of themselves, interesting.
- Your not understanding a piece does not guarantee that it is deep and meaningful.
- Pretentiousness is usually a cover for shoddy craftsmanship.

There are many others, but that is a good sampling. I have written this introduction bit for one main reason: to show you that I am very rarely a defender of what passes for public art.

Seattle, however, seemed to be connected with some kind of rational thought in most of their displays. There was the odd piece of unmitigated crap, certainly, but for the most part the art seemed right.

When I think of art that enhances a community, I think of things that relate to the history and values of that society. Much of the art in Seattle had this feel to it. A lot of Native American imagery could be found. There was also much in the way of artwork that functioned to hide the stark concrete and steel that made up the streets, bridges, and buildings.

So that was something about Seattle and the surrounding area, with which I was at peace. Notice, please, the past tense.

When I live in a place for a while, I like to keep up on the news from that place. I read the online version of the newspapers from these places very regularly. It was on one of these catch-up sessions that I saw the article that spawned the coming vitriol.

Allow me to set the stage. The city of Edmonds, Washington, is in Snohomish County, just north of Seattle. Many years ago there was a rather stylized totem pole that was erected near a motel. The totem pole was carved from a single length of cedar and depicted normal totem subjects as well as such unusual characters as mermaids and frogs.

A local seafood shop then purchased this totem pole. Eventually it was donated to the city of Edmonds. Installed at the Public Safety Complex, it stood there until it was taken down in 1999.

Why would this spark interest two years later? Well, the Public Safety Complex was being demolished. Mr. Sydney Locke was the overseer of the project and found the totem pole in a dumpster. He went to the owner of the demolition company (who was granted total salvage rights) and asked if he could have the totem pole. He felt it was part of the area's history and should be preserved.

He was given permission to take the item away. We will pick the story up at this point in a bit.

Why would the City of Edmonds just throw away this piece? Well apparently the all-knowing Edmonds Art Commission decided that it had no artistic value. Now I don't know if any of you have ever done any carving. I have done very little. But it ain't easy.

One would think that the time, effort, and skill would be worth something. One would think that the fact that it was a well-known bit of Pacific Northwest quirkiness would be worth something. But, the City of Edmonds decided it was better to throw it away than either donate it to some other group or even put it up for sale.

I think this is pretty disrespectful to the anonymous artist who first created the piece, as well as to the public in general. This act of disrespect is one thing... but I promised you a crime. Okay, here goes.

When the City of Edmonds discovered that Mr. Locke was in possession of the piece and was in process of restoring it, they didn't give him a round of applause. They sent him a letter from a lawyer stating that he was to immediately return the totem pole to the city.

Knowing that they had thrown it out, and that he got the piece from people who had full salvage rights to the site, he asked why they wanted it back. Had Edmonds gotten over their cranial-rectal insertion? Were they going to find a home for the piece? HELL NO!

They want it back so they can throw it away again! Mr. Locke thinks this is wrong. He told them he would not give it back. So what did the City of Edmonds do? They brought a lawsuit against Sydney Locke.

Whoever loses this case will owe upwards of \$40,000 in legal fees and court costs. So not only is the city working really hard at coming off like a bunch of spoiled children, but they are also risking 40 grand in taxpayer money. Just to get back something they deemed of no artistic value. Just so they can throw it away a second time.

I say SHAME ON EDMONDS!

Not only did they throw away a piece of artwork that I think is one hell of a lot better than the crap that most cities actually install, but they are making life hell for the man who is trying to preserve it! The city's actions on both counts are an unconscionable act of disregard for art and artists.

Oh, in case you want to voice your opinion to the powers that be... Mayor Gary Haakenson can be emailed at haakenson@ci.edmonds.wa.us .

Well that will take care of it once again. Until next time, from the home of the Louisville Slugger, this is your grumpy host,

Tommie Howell