

?I don?t know much about art, but I know what I hate*??

by BROCK WEIR

If it weren't for the bronze shoes close to the ground catching the odd beam of sunshine, there would have been little clue as to what stood before us shrouded beneath an upturned burlap sack.

With ropes tying the covering at what appeared to be the neck and the waist, It was an unsettling image at first glance, but we had a fair idea of what was being kept from prying eyes; yet, as fair as this idea was, there was no way of telling it would become something of an unfortunate phenom.

It was about 15 years ago now that dozens of fans stood in Lucille Ball Memorial Park in Celoron, NY, to witness the unveiling of a new statue honouring one of the most famous redheads in the world, the spot chosen as this small village in Western New York served as her home for the many of her formative early years.

The statue was a missing piece of the puzzle in the popular greenspace. The village had renamed their lakefront park, once the home to one of the most popular and bustling amusement park destinations in North America from the late 1800s and well into the 20th century, in her honour. A permanent memorial to its namesake was probably the next logical step.

Excitement in the community mounted as the clock ticked closer and closer to the unveiling and when the time finally came to remove the burlap, I can only wager that some in the crowd would have wanted the bag put back into place in reasonably short order.

Alas, the well-intentioned community-building exercise was not a particularly good likeness of Lucille Ball. After the unveiling, that could have been that, but a couple of years later, one tourist visited the statue, posted a photo along with a bit of gothic prose that went viral on social media, and the ?Scary Lucy? meme was born.

While it was not so great for the equally well-intentioned artist who had numerous other better-received statues as mute testament to his work in the surrounding communities, it was a boon for tourism after people began flocking to it to get their own piece of the social media action.

It wasn't all for laughs, however. As odd it may sound, it sparked an unlikely discussion on sculpture as a medium, artistic merits (or lack thereof) writ large, and by the time another sculptor came along to donate a much, much more accurate likeness of the I Love Lucy star, ?Scary Lucy? was still such a draw that the new kid on the block didn't replace it outright; instead, it was moved a few feet away to still draw people in.

A draw is a draw, after all ? and, if we measure the success of public art by engagement, even though it initially came to the fore in a negative light, maybe it was an overall win.

We're fortunate to live in communities where public art is alive, well, and valued.

Our efforts might often veer towards the more traditional art forms and depictions, but they and a few out-of-the-box examples can make us look at a topic, issue, or even geographic location through a different lens and context.

Some might hem and haw about the value of these initiatives and, of course, the price tag, but communities without ?character? can become interchangeable ? and if such examples of art can be found locally to spur conversation and a drive to learn more, so much the better.

Zooming out from a local lens for a moment, simply look at last Friday's Olympic Opening Ceremonies in Paris.

Most of us are used to watching such ceremonies on TV unfolding from a stadium or another kind of purpose-built venue, but lacking those last week, the City of Lights was transformed into a veritable canvas all its own, where a millennia of French history and culture was brought to life before our very eyes ? all tied to locations that dot the shoreline and traverse the span of the Seine.

The results were evocative, mesmerizing, and truly nothing like we have ever seen before.

In my opinion, from the initial fun with the torch all the way through the post-cauldron performance by Celine Dion atop the Eiffel Tower ? a moment I am sure, years from now, will go down as one of the most iconic moments in television, let alone Olympic, history ? it created a gold standard and rewrote the rules of what was possible in such a well-known, well-travelled, location.

Yet, the reaction from some people who watched the ceremony has been both perplexing, telling, and infuriating.

Perhaps under- or un-aware of French history, the chorus of singing ?headless? (well, head-on-neck-less) Marie Antoinettes standing in the windows of the Conciergerie, the very place in which she was imprisoned ahead of her execution, sparked off-the-wall conspiracy theories as to what we were seeing. Or being ?exposed? to.

A similar phenomenon took place a short while later in the ceremony. In a display of dance and contemporary culture, a tableau of diverse performers got armchair athletes all hot and bothered assuming that the assembled artists were imitating artistic representations of The Last Supper? despite the presence of the cerulean-painted Greek God Bacchus or Dionysus front and centre, a nod to Olympus? but those who vent spleens in social media echo chambers are loathe to let facts get in the way of a good fainting spell.

Yet, all made sense if you were equipped with some knowledge of history and art and, barring that, were similarly equipped with the curiosity to scratch the surface ever so slightly, do a bit of digging, and learning.

Despite some self-manufactured controversies, the ceremony underscored, to my mind, the importance of education and art, both within schools and within the wider communities, in both the public and private spheres, and in living, breathing spaces.

In short, the art of what's possible in communities as small as ours or as expansive as Paris.

Much has been written lately about a ?return to the basics? in education ? and some changes have indeed proved practical and a step in the right direction. In my view, both history and art are essentials in these basics. But these, particularly art, are often among the first on the chopping block when budgets get tight.

And that shouldn't be the case. They are integral to interpreting the world around us, in inspiring future generations to pick up the mantle, to continue creating, to continue challenging perspectives, to bring people together, and to leave our stamps on the places we call home.

* With apologies to C. Montgomery Burns