Mayor Bobby J. Hopewell  
Kalamazoo City Hall  
241 West South Street  
Kalamazoo, MI 49007  
mayor@kalamazooicity.org

March 5, 2018

Dear Mayor Hopewell and City Commission Members,

As an organization dedicated to promoting free speech, including freedom of artistic expression, we were concerned to learn that the Kalamazoo City Commission is considering the permanent removal of *Fountain of the Pioneers*, a large, site-specific work of public art that occupies the center of Bronson Park. Since the relocation of such a physically integrated work could only be achieved by the irreversible act of demolishing it, NCAC advises the City to move slowly as it considers the serious ramifications of destroying this artwork (including the precedent it would set for dealing with future public artworks that may spark strong emotions). We strongly urge you to take time to listen to a wide range of opinions and fully consider all options before committing to this costly and controversial undertaking.

*Fountain of the Pioneers* was created for Kalamazoo in the late 1930s, and has inspired debate ever since. It is a large Art Deco-style sculptural work that incorporates a reflecting pool and the stylized figures of a “Pioneer” and an “Indian,” the latter standing approximately 18 feet tall from the floor of the pool. It was created by the Italian-American Modernist artist and designer Alfonso Iannelli, and dedicated in 1940 under the Works Progress Administration. In 2016, it was listed as a nationally significant work in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Bronson Park has been located at the center of a NRHP district since 1983.

At a meeting of the City Commission last October, a group of protestors put forward their interpretation of this artwork as an embodiment of white supremacist hate and oppression. However, according to some who have studied the work, including educators and art historians, the sculpture symbolizes Native American resistance to westward expansion. Those who are familiar with Iannelli’s work and the period in which he created it, claim that he incorporated this anti-westward expansion message as abstractly as possible lest it spark controversy.

After the events of Charlottesville, many cities have appointed special task forces to re-evaluate public visual representations of white supremacy that appear to celebrate our national legacy of racial divisiveness. However, we must not confuse works of art such as Iannelli’s with monuments that were historically intended to send a clear racist message. While *Fountain of the Pioneers* is an art work that allows for multiple interpretations, Confederate monuments, most of them erected in the Jim Crow era in the 1920s, explicitly celebrate the values of the Old South, among them the belief in white supremacy.
Given that the Commission’s rationale for removing the work is that it can be interpreted as racist towards Native Americans, we urge you to consider that the demolition of *Fountain of the Pioneers* goes against the wishes of the Gun Lake Tribal Council, the local tribal group that has been working with the City to restore the fountain for over a decade. In a letter dated November 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2017, the Gun Lake Tribal Council expressed their understanding that “History cannot be erased by simply tearing down [a] controversial artwork because of interpretations. Removing the Iannelli sculpture will not change the fact that many of our Pottawatomi relatives were in fact ‘forcibly removed’ west of the Mississippi River.”

While removing the work will not change history, it could provide much needed opportunities to bring that history to light – something that would counter racist attitudes rather than confirm them. Together with the online initiative that is currently under development, *Fountain of the Pioneers* opens a necessary conversation and creates awareness of forgotten or suppressed histories.

In light of new developments regarding public visual artworks and monuments post-Charlottesville, we strongly advise the City to appoint a new special task force and to listen the many voices of its community, not just those of one group of protesters. We urge the City to move slowly as it considers the diverse members of the community as they voice their concerns over the fate of this historically significant artwork. Artworks often invite strong emotions, and if we were to remove every artwork that did so, we would significantly impoverish our public sphere.

We are happy to offer the City further assistance as needed.

Sincerely,

Joy Garnett  
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