

# Center Points

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## SCULPTING HISTORICAL MEMORY

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*"Signers' Hall," 42 bronze sculptures of the signers of the United States Constitution, National Constitution Center, Philadelphia, Pa. Photo courtesy of StudioEIS.*

## Sculpting Historical Memory

### The StudioEIS Archive

In 1935, sculptor Robert Aitken finished work on *The Future*. The statue, positioned on the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C., shows a young woman gazing out from the present, holding a tome dedicated to the past. Carved into the base are words from Shakespeare's famous phrase, "What's past is prologue."

"If 'What's past is prologue,'" says Ivan Schwartz, co-founder of America's most prolific studio for historical sculpture, StudioEIS, "then we hope in some small way our archive finds useful future purpose."

The Briscoe Center has acquired the StudioEIS Archive, and there is no doubt it will find useful future purpose. During the past 40 years, StudioEIS has produced more historical sculptures than any studio in the United States, making the record of its work part of America's cultural history.

StudioEIS has covered a wide variety of topics, including civil rights, Native American history, celebrity and the presidency. Its artists have sculpted many iconic figures, including Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Elvis Presley and Albert Einstein.

Most of these projects represent attempts by Americans to make new sense of the past. "Historians are rightly interested in the relationship between symbolism and memory in American culture, and the StudioEIS Archive speaks powerfully on this subject," says Don Carleton, executive director of the Briscoe Center.

The StudioEIS Archive represents a paper trail left by the debates, interpretations, decisions and controversies that these projects unearthed.

At the heart of the collection are detailed project files that outline StudioEIS's relationship with clients, painters, costume and model makers, anthropologists and historians. By documenting the creative process of countless historical projects, the archive lifts the veil on how public commemoration is conceived, initiated and realized.

StudioEIS was founded in 1977 during a time "when America began building museums at an unprecedented rate," recounts Schwartz. While varied in scope and size, the majority of projects have sought to "put a face to history" by creating lifelike sculptures that engage museum visitors.

Sculpting lifelike historical figures is no easy task. At Philadelphia's National Constitution Center, StudioEIS artists were tasked with sculpting all 42 signers of the U.S. Constitution—even the ones who never sat down for a portrait. In order to create statues of George Washington (at several stages in life) for the Mount Vernon Estate, StudioEIS worked with forensic experts to make computerized models that informed the final work.

However, historical sculptures are not simply about re-creating physical appearances. "Some of our projects were attempts at revisionist history," says Schwartz. For example, the statue of Lincoln at Gettysburg National Military Park shows him half-smiling, gazing optimistically at the horizon. This is a far cry from the stoic, somewhat awkward figure that photographs of Lincoln

*Next page, top left: Four presidents amid statues created by StudioEIS for the Richard Nixon Presidential Library. From the Diana Walker Photographic Archive.*

"They are leaders who have made a difference.  
Not because they wished it, but because they willed it."  
-RN



portray. The statue's peaceful impression—imparted by the subtle curl of a lip and a slight angling of the eyes—is a symbolic statement that enhances the debate about Lincoln as well as challenging the public's perception of him.

The Briscoe Center is home to numerous collections related to public remembrance, imagery and memorialization. In 2013, the center acquired the Whitney Smith Flag Research Center Collection, which documents the symbolism and significance of flags and heraldry. The center is also home to the Coppini-Tauch Papers, which detail Pompeo Coppini's historical sculpture projects including George Littlefield's World War I memorials on the UT Austin campus. Furthermore, the UT Office of Community Relations Records include material related to campus statues of Martin Luther King Jr. and Barbara Jordan.

"UT is no stranger to the disputes that public sculpture can arouse. Campus is home to statues of Confederate leaders as well as civil rights heroes, which has caused ongoing discussion about the symbolic message being conveyed to students," says Carleton. "Wherever one falls on such debates, they undoubtedly show the power of symbols, history and imagery at work in our culture—power that the center is keen to document through archival acquisitions."



## Alexander Cockburn

Over five decades, Alexander Cockburn became one of the most popular intellectual columnists in Britain and America, writing for many publications including *The New Statesman*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Cockburn's importance is not easily appreciated in an era of endless polemical commentary. He was an early pioneer of a now common form of journalistic writing that made the press itself the heart of the story. He also founded the website *CounterPunch* and often wrote scathingly about his peers, including highly publicized spats with Christopher Hitchens and Thomas Friedman.

The papers include column drafts, correspondence, research files, postcards and notes. Several documents refer to his father, Claud Cockburn, a reporter who covered the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s. The papers add to the center's growing resources on the history of journalism as well as intellectual history, which include the papers of Norman Birnbaum, Walter Prescott Webb and C. Wright Mills.

## Ron Bennett

Photographer Ron Bennett was on the scene in June 1968 when Sen. Robert F. Kennedy was fatally shot. He documented many other historic events including Richard Nixon's resignation in August 1974, the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island in March 1979 and the Camp David Peace Accords in September 1978.

"Photojournalism is covering history in the making," says Bennett. "I think of myself as a historian. I'm honored to have worked with some of the most dedicated photographers in the business in some of the most historic times."

Spanning six decades, the Ron Bennett Photographic Archive includes photographic prints, film negatives, transparencies and printed materials. The bulk of the material is from Bennett's work for United Press International between 1968 and 1988.



Bob Hope and President Nixon, Ron Bennett Photographic Archive.