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Embracing The Past

One of the common assumptions is that a memorial should be an object or a place to remember past events. Its sole purpose is to be an eternal reminder of matters of history. It can be a monument but can also be a procedure of some sort. They also can be valuable sources of information for youth to help them understand the sacrifices of the past generations.

When we compare the works of Maya Lin and Edgar Heap of Birds, different in their form, yet with overall common meaning we begin to see the similarities in the idea, which is memory. Memorials hold a similar idea of remembrance, however, each memorial is unique.

While designing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Maya Lin decided to choose engraved names of the fallen instead of symbols of heroism which previous war memorials had. The monument itself presents two black stone walls sunken into the ground. This is symbolizes a closed wound that is healing. The intention of the design, as she says was to make war events apolitical, not to civilize war or to glorify it by forgetting the sacrifice involved. From her personal perspective, artist wanted reflect the nature of accepting the death of the loved one in this design. She wanted to make an art form that all people could relate to. Another one of her works is the Civil Rights memorial, which was designed to symbolize the healing and soothing nature of water. The memorial itself is a stone cone fountain cut in an inverted asymmetrical shape.

Edgar Heap of Birds’s Most Serene Republics installations were made in a completely different format. This exhibition, consisting of two temporary public installations (multilingual Italian/English/Cheyenne public signs written in Italian, English and Cheyenne). First part of the art piece analyzes Venetian history and the other one is the artist’s homage to the Native American warriors who died performing in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows. Wheel - yet another memorial made by the artist, located in Denver Art Museum was made specifically for its site. The composition made of steel, porcelain, and stone contains ten sculptures in three different tree shapes. Each one has its own rich symbolism, writing and imagery. And they all refer to the forked poles that hold up a Sun Dance lodge. When he was making the original drawings with twelve trees in the circle he decided that the final artwork will only have ten. According to his words, in this creative impression of the Wheel the decision was made so the composition would not be read as religious (Denver Art Museum). Heap of Birds also wanted to make this site it a gathering place for the community.
 Visiting these memorials might reduce trauma-related symptoms. Researchers suggest that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial helps veterans overcome their PTSD symptom severity (Watkins). The reflective nature of the stone, used to build a monument, also helps veterans in deeper realization of their trauma. When emotional wounds begin to heal, people change their perception of the events of the past. They embrace their history, to allow them to live with the wounds of the past. When designing a memorial, artist should carefully consider the capacity to balance a conflict between creativity and tradition. An artful design can make a difference and help make the memorial approachable for more people.

Works Cited

Watkins, Nicholas, et al. “The War Memorial as Healing Environment: The Psychological Effect of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on Vietnam War Combat Veterans’ Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms.” *Environment and Behavior*, vol. 42, no. 3, Oct. 2010, pp. 351–375., doi:10.1177/0013916510361873.
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