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**MAS Testimony before the City Council Oversight Hearing on Improving the Gender and Cultural Diversity of Monuments Located in City Parks**

February 25, 2019

The Municipal Art Society of New York (MAS) has been one of the watchful guardians over New York City's architecture and public art since 1883. It was this process of "watching" which brought to our attention the deteriorating state of many of the City's remarkable public sculptures throughout the five boroughs. Following its founding premise of commissioning and endorsing public art, MAS, in 1987, in partnership with the Public Design Commission (formally Art Commission) and the NYC Parks Department, launched the Adopt-A-Monument program to restore 20 of the most threatened statues in the five boroughs, damaged by pollution, neglect and vandalism. The MAS sought corporations, foundations, and private funders to underwrite the cost of each conservation. Success led to the second partnership with the city—the Adopt-A-Mural program initiated in 1991.

To date, 52 works of public art have been rescued, restored, and, importantly, maintained, the less celebrated but crucial aspect, through this program. The artworks are far-ranging in location, style, and material treatment, representing an investment of \$4 million to the City. Included among these is the magnificent Beaux-Arts ceiling mural in this very chamber room, *New York Receiving the Tributes of the Nations*, painted by Tabor Sears from 1903, as well as iconic sculptures in your neighborhoods. Some of these are: the *Lincoln* and the *Lafayette* monuments in Prospect Park, Brooklyn; the *Rocket Thrower* from the 1964 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens; the *Heinrich Heine Fountain*, Joyce Kilmer Park in the Bronx; and the *Neptune Fountain* in Snug Harbor, Staten Island.

Thus, MAS greatly appreciates the attention of the City Council to the very important matter of today's hearing, made especially relevant in recent years.

The City's track record for commemorating people of color and women has improved greatly since 1945, when only two non-white male representations existed in figurative statuary. Today, of the 118 sculptures of individuals, 23 represent people of color or women. While progress has been made, indeed the City has not gone far enough.

We ask that the new task force take note that figurative public art has been on the wane in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and therefore urge them to think beyond bronze and stone in telling our city's untold stories. We also believe that the charge of this task force should be as broad as possible in order to seize the incredible momentum towards equity. Every art form should be plumbed for its inherent ability to reflect on the city and its rich narratives. And beyond formal art, park names, street signs, temporary installations, and celebrations are all ways of amplifying this history, as well.

On a more specific note, we respectfully ask that the Chair of the Landmarks Preservation Commission (rather than the Executive Director) and the Chair of the Public Design Commission both be appointed to the proposed task force.