

# Keep Ann Dancing in Context

Laura M. Holzman

Just two days remain before the fundraising deadline to Keep Ann Dancing. The Indianapolis Cultural Trail has set a goal of raising \$262,800 by the end of the day on June 29 to rebuild and maintain Julian Opie's 2007 sculpture, "Ann Dancing."

The campaign has elicited support for the artwork, including from people who describe the sculpture as "iconic" and "emblematic of the city of Indianapolis."

It has simultaneously elicited critiques of the high price tag, calls to fund local art instead of work by an outsider, and questions about causes that may be more deserving of such a fundraising effort. I'm not here to say that we must *Keep Ann Dancing* (to use the language of the campaign). But we must keep "Ann Dancing" in context.

Indianapolis is not alone in considering whether its public art is worth keeping. It's not alone in evaluating how much money is appropriate to spend on an artwork that has become part of the city's cultural landscape. The campaign to Keep Ann Dancing has focused on emphasizing the local value of the artwork, and that's important to consider. But it's also important to recognize that Indianapolis' issues do not exist in a vacuum. We can and must understand what's happening in our city in broader historical and geographic contexts.

I teach the history of public art at IUPUI, and I recently published a book about art and city identity in Philadelphia around the year 2000. The language and actions I'm seeing around the Keep Ann Dancing campaign remind me of stories that I highlight in *Contested Image: Defining Philadelphia for the Twenty-First Century* (Temple University Press, 2019).

One of those stories even has a Hoosier connection. For the US Bicentennial in 1976, Robert Indiana's gallery lent one of his LOVE sculptures to Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love (and the place where the Declaration of Independence was signed). The sculpture was installed near centrally located City Hall, where it stayed for two years.

In 1978, Philadelphia leaders returned the sculpture to Indiana's gallery because they believed that the estimated price of \$45,000 was more than the struggling city could spend on public art.

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This decision made Philadelphians furious. People had become attached to the sculpture. They viewed it as an icon representative of their city.

In response to the outcry, philanthropist F. Eugene Dixon, Jr., who owned the 76ers basketball team and was chair of the city's Art Commission, bought the sculpture for \$35,000 and donated it to the city. Today it remains one of the most recognizable elements of Philadelphia's landscape. Through this and other actions, Philadelphia's leaders decided that arts and culture were important elements of the city's identity. By the early 2000s, Philadelphia's economy and reputation were on the rebound and the arts were a central element of the city's transformation. Thirty years later, Philadelphians faced a similar challenge. "The Gross Clinic", an impressive 1875 painting by renowned Philadelphian artist Thomas Eakins was slated to be sold from the local collection where it had been held since the 19th century. The artwork depicts a famous Philadelphia surgeon performing an innovative operation, and it is widely recognized as an important element of American art history.

The National Gallery of Art and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas had agreed to buy the painting for \$68 million unless a local institution could match the price. Local cultural organizations, charitable foundations, and individuals joined together to raise the massive sum necessary to keep the painting in Philadelphia. They passionately rallied around the cause of preserving a city icon. At the same time, some critics took the opportunity to point out the many other causes that would benefit from millions of dollars of donations. Considering the stories of "LOVE" and "The Gross Clinic", let's put Ann Dancing in context: In 1978, the price of "LOVE" was \$35,000. That's approximately \$140,000 in 2019. (I calculated this estimate using the Inflation Calculator from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm).)

The Indianapolis Cultural Trail estimates that repairing "Ann Dancing" will cost approximately \$152,000, plus additional funds for maintaining the site, conserving the sculpture in the future, and supporting other public art initiatives in Indianapolis.

In 2006, "The Gross Clinic" cost \$68,000,000. At the time, it was the largest sum ever paid for an American artwork made before World War II. Ann Dancing is no Gross Clinic, and I don't think anyone would argue that it is. But "The Gross Clinic" sale can still help put "Ann Dancing" in perspective.

These campaigns, of course, revolve around money. But money is not the most important factor. What's more important is that each of these episodes is an opportunity for leaders and community members to make a statement about what their city values. In the case of LOVE and The Gross Clinic, the Philadelphians who rallied around these artworks asserted that internationally relevant art was important to their city's identity. They vehemently responded to

the potential loss of these artworks. I haven't seen the same kind of passion in regard to "Ann Dancing." Maybe that's telling about the artwork. Maybe it's telling about Indianapolis.

The real question isn't whether we should rebuild "Ann Dancing." Instead, it's: what kind of statement do we want to make about our city? Do we want Indianapolis to be a place that takes its public art seriously? Do we want Indianapolis to be a place that responsibly plans for the future by funding the long-term maintenance of its public art? Do we want Indianapolis to be a place that embraces a fun installation by an established international artist? Do we want Indianapolis to be a place that makes room for unexpected, challenging art that inspires us to think differently about the world? Do we want Indianapolis to be insular, or do we want it to make its decisions by taking into account relevant examples from other places and times?