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Managing Monumental Crises: The Bakardade (Solitude) National Basque Monument

Carmelo Urza &
William A. Douglass

Setting the scene

A lot has happened since the National Monument to the Basque Shepherd was inaugurated 34 years ago in Rancho San Rafael Park in Reno, Nevada. Its surroundings now have a baseball field, a nature path, a dog park, and a mural in the connecting tunnel under North McCarran Boulevard. The Basque Monument has been silent witness to it all. In turn, one can only speculate about the comments that the Basque “green giant” statue has elicited over those last three decades. Common questions include: Who were the Basques? Why did they come to Nevada? What does the sculpture represent?

In brief, the Basque homeland is in the western nook of the Pyrenees, straddling the borderlands between the modern countries of Spain and France. Ethnically and linguistically, Basques differ from the larger Spanish and French populations. The intending herder that came to the American West was likely born on a *baserri* (farm). He

attended school and church in his tiny village, danced at festivals near and far, competed in local rural sporting competitions, and participated in a rich social array of first communions, marriages, and funerals.¹

Why did they leave? Carmelo Urza's father, Anastasio, is a good example. His family lived on the Urzaa *baserri* not far from the nucleus of the village of Nabarniz, Bizkaia. The small size of the Basque farm does not support more than one stem family,² and so Anastasio, the youngest of nine children, joined the merchant marines at 14 and served in Spain's (and the Basque) navy from 1934 until 1939. His ship was captured by Franco's forces during the Spanish Civil War. His older brother, Marcos, also fought with the Basque Nationalist resistance in 1937 and 1938.

Franco's rise to power was facilitated by Hitler and Mussolini, both crushed in the Second World War. While Franco maintained ostensible neutrality in that conflict, he was tar-brushed with the Fascist image and remained an international pariah. Boycotted by most other countries and excluded from the nascent United Nations, Franco turned Spain into an autarky. As a result, there was genuine hunger in the streets.

Anastasio and Marcos wanted a better life. Fortuitously, men in their village had long emigrated to Idaho to herd sheep. The first of their relatives left in the late 19th century, followed by a continual outpouring of siblings and cousins that lasted until the 1950s. They knew that they would have to leave their socially tight-knit family, kindred, and circle of friends and live in the vast wilderness of the American West—facing the challenges of caring for 1,000 sheep amidst wild animals, unpredictable weather, and unrelenting solitude. Most of these Basque immigrants intended to sacrifice 8 or 10 years of their life, save their wages, and then return to the Old World with a financial stake that would allow them to purchase a small business or apartment. If unmarried, perhaps they would then attract a bride as well.³

Through their Idaho connections, Anastasio and Marcos were offered a job herding sheep for \$200 monthly—work shunned by most Americans due to its isolation, challenges, and low pay. On March 12, 1948, the brothers flew together to New York en route to Idaho. According to the U.S. Congressional Record, Anastasio had a wife and two children back in Spain, while Marcos had four offspring there. Both men were sending support money to their spouses before bringing their families to the United States.⁴

¹ Douglass, *Death in Murelaga*, *passim*.

² Douglass, *Rural Exodus*; Douglass, *The Basque Peasantry*; Douglass, *The Basque Stem Family*.

³ Douglass, *Serving Girls and Shepherders*.

⁴ McCarran, *Report*, 17.

So, Basque women came too, working grueling hours supporting the sheep industry in boarding houses, ranch kitchens, and sheep camps. While Anastasio worked the ranch just off the Snake River in southwestern Idaho, his wife, María Luisa—a city girl from the Bilbao area—became a ranch cook, preparing three meals a day, seven days a week for (depending on the season) five to twenty Basque men. After eleven years of social isolation, she said “no más!”. Years later, Carmelo heard her say: “If I’d had the money, I would have returned to Bilbao the day after I arrived.”

Some of the earliest Basque immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth became nomadic sheepmen on the open range. They would acquire a band and then wander about the public lands. Since they planned to sell out after their sojourn, they had little interest in acquiring a sedentary ranch property. Their wanderings, however, brought them into conflict with settled ranchers—in the main Anglo Americans—who labelled these nomads “tramp sheepmen” and did all they could to harass them into leaving. While technically open to all on a first-come basis, the Anglo ranchers regarded the public land adjacent to their private property to be their exclusive range as well. There were even a few fatal confrontations, and all Basques came to be denigrated by the Americans. Indeed, one Idaho newspaper of the epoch stated that the Basque intruders were worse than the Chinese.⁵

But the years went by, and the restrictive immigration laws that the United States implemented in the early 1920s, combined with the creation of federal control of most of the public lands of the American West in the 1930s, eliminated the itinerant sheepman while constraining the supply of Basque shepherders as well. World War II contributed to a general labor crisis throughout the American economy, while creating a full-blown labor shortage for the sheep industry. It was then that western congressional delegations began to craft a series of laws that allowed the ranchers to legalize the status of a few Basque illegal aliens who were in the country and to exempt a number of intending herders from the annual immigration quota for Spanish nationals.

The August 14, 1950, Senate bill S1192, entitled “Certain Basque Aliens”, was to grant permanent residency in the United States to: “152 aliens who were admitted as temporary visitors between 1943 and 1949 for the purpose of herding sheep.... Attempts to find shepherders within the United States have not been successful and if the present beneficiaries of this bill are required to leave the United States the sheep growing industry would suffer substantial losses.”⁶ The accompanying letter to the bill from the Deputy Attorney General underscores that: “Shepherding is a lonely, monotonous occupation.

⁵ Douglass and Bilbao, *Amerikanuak*, 270.

⁶ McCarran, Report, 2.

Because of the long hours and arduous work, there are few applicants for that type of employment.”⁷ The Basque immigrant was now desired rather than vilified.

Two of those “Certain Basque Aliens” were Anastasio and his brother Marcos. By the fortuitous coincidence of factors culminating in S1192, he, and by extension—his family—had gained a toehold on the lowest socio-economic rung in the country. Now a permanent resident, Carmelo’s father herded sheep for five more years and then sent for his family after ascending to ranch manager.

Subsequent measures were designed to facilitate sojourning rather than permanent residence. Men would be recruited for three-year shepherding contracts, after which they would have to leave the United States. While theoretically an opportunity open to all Spaniards, in reality the Western Range Association (a sheep ranchers’ organization) concentrated its recruitment in the Basque Country.⁸

Meanwhile, in the post-war era American attitudes towards rural life itself changed from regarding it to be backwards and stultifying to authentic and fulfilling. Norman Rockwell’s popular paintings celebrated simpler rural lifestyles and values. Consequently, the solitary figure of the Basque herder began to be viewed with romantic nostalgia.

The publication of Robert Laxalt’s *Sweet Promised Land*, in 1957, created an early Basque version of the “roots” phenomenon that was to follow. The iconic account narrates his father’s first return to his Basque homeland in Xiberoa after Dominic’s decades as an immigrant shepherd in the American West. The Laxalt story echoed the experience of the majority of Basque-American families—providing them with both ethnic pride and their literary spokesman.⁹ In 1959, Robert joined with John Ascuaga and other Basques to organize a Basque festival in Sparks, Nevada. Billed as the first “national” one, it prompted creation of dozens of Basque Clubs throughout the West, most with their own annual festival.¹⁰

Subsequently, in the Basque Country the much-hated Franco dictatorship ended with his death in 1975, transitioning Spain into a democracy and the Basque Provinces into an autonomous region with its own government.

In 1984, Chicago Sculpture International invited Basque artists to exhibit in its major annual exhibit on Navy Pier. Nestor Basterretxea, Remigio Mendiburu and Vicente Larrea

⁷ Ibid, 22.

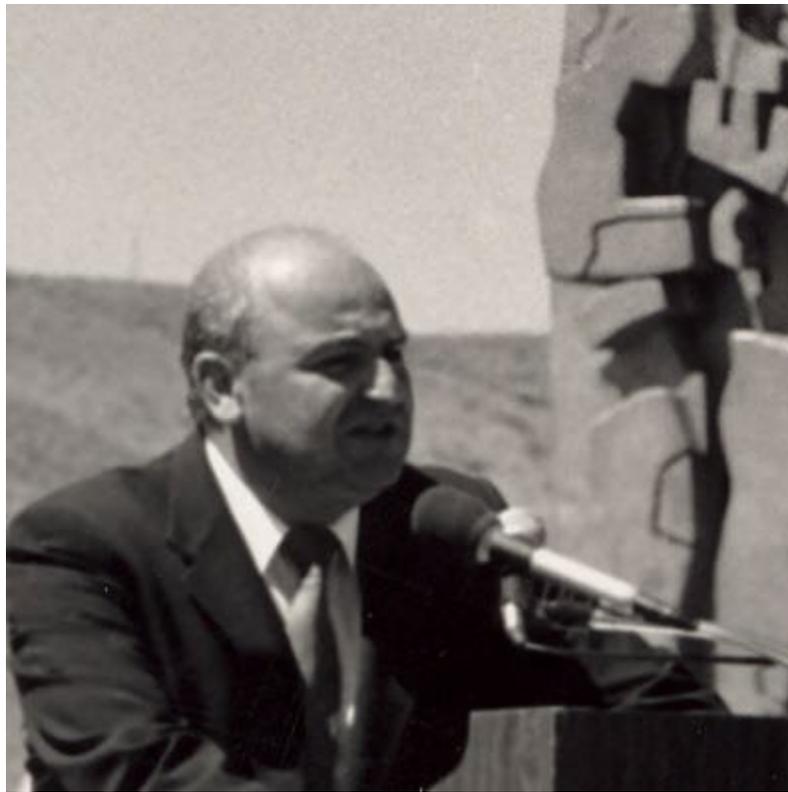
⁸ Douglass, *The Vanishing Basque Shepherd*.

⁹ Laxalt, *Sweet Promised Land*.

¹⁰ Douglass, *Inventing an Ethnic Identity*.

each sent three of their sculptures. While in Chicago to give public lectures about their work, they met José Ramón Cengotitabengoa. José Ramón was living in Chicago, employed as a representative of a steel foundry in the Basque Country. After the show was over, he decided to buy a piece from each of the sculptors--Bastarretxea's Orreaga (Roncesvalles), Mendiburu's Gastelu (Castle), and Larrea's El Caracolillo (The Little Snail).

José Ramón was the modern-day version of Don Quixote. He dreamed what was likely the impossible dream. With contagious enthusiasm, he convinced the three sculptors to join him in visiting the Basque enclaves of the West in the summer of 1985. During the trip, they all came up with the idea of each producing a monumental piece for a sculpture garden constituting a National Monument to the Basque Shepherd.¹¹



José Ramón Cengotitabengoa at the dedication

While the very nature of the project obviously privileged the Basque shepherd legacy, it was not José Ramón's intent to simply evoke the image of Dominic (the protagonist of *Sweet Promised Land*) wandering the wilds of Nevada with his band. Rather, by involving the abstract art of three contemporary sculptors, he wished to underscore to the American public the sophisticated modernity of today's Basque Country. *The New Basque Country!*

¹¹ Urza, *Solitude*, 3-4.

José Ramón was also determined that the monument should be in Reno, given its location in the center of Basque settlement throughout the American West and its status as a major tourist destination. He contacted William Douglass, Coordinator of the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, Reno, and asked for his assistance. Douglass suggested that Reno's regional San Rafael Park might be willing to provide an appropriate site, and he agreed to approach the proper authorities with the request. Indeed, the undeveloped section of the park on the flanks of Peavine Mountain had once been sheep range utilized by Basque herders. There was also the advantage that, by making the Basque Monument a part of Rancho San Rafael Park, Washoe County would also be assuming stewardship and maintenance of it.

Douglass sought, and received, support from Ginny Kersey, one of the primary visionaries who had persuaded the county to buy the working ranch and create the park, and Gene Sullivan, the director of Washoe County Parks. Several local environmental and educational groups endorsed the project as well, given its potential of highlighting for schoolchildren and the general public the importance of the Basques' contribution to local and regional ecology and history.

Soon after Jose Ramón selected Reno, his business obligations required him to relinquish his role as the head of project. Gone was the project's dreamer, its primary supporter, the rain maker. But his legacy was to live on. Several Basques in the Reno area were now committed to trying to make the Basque Monument a reality. A committee was formed and strategy devised. A booklet was printed describing the project, while highlighting the support from a U.S. Senator, the governors of three Western states (Nevada, Idaho, and California), and the presidents of the three Basque governmental entities in Europe (the Conseil Générale du Département des Pyrénées Atlantiques, Gobierno de Navarra, and Eusko Jaurlaritza).¹²

The reality, however, was that this committee of well-meaning volunteers, all with full-time jobs, was now holding the bag for three huge sculptures. It was more than the members were willing to take on. They wisely decided to try to make one sculpture a reality before considering more.

¹² Ibid, 6-12; 30-31.



"Bakardade:" Basque sheepherder statue by Nestor Basterretxea in Reno, Nevada

A fly on Idiazabal cheese

Around 1987, the Monument project was gaining momentum and the committee was close to selecting the artist. It was then that Douglass mentioned that José Tasende, the owner of the Tasende Art Gallery in La Jolla, CA, was coming to Reno for a visit. During that stay, Tasende, American representative of the world-famed sculptor Eduardo Txillida, arguably the most famous Basque artist of the day, suggested his client might be interested in designing the monument. It was clear, however, that Txillida would never enter into a competition. Douglass and Robert Laxalt were intrigued by the possibility of having a Txillida sculpture in Nevada.

Tasende convinced Eduardo to come to the American West for a site visit to explore the possibility of designing the Monument. Laxalt spearheaded a reception for him in Gardnerville—inviting a number of prominent northern Nevadans (potential donors) to attend. A 20-minute video was shown of Txillida’s work and philosophy. He then shared with the crowd his vision of replicating, on a mountaintop in the Nevada desert, the monumental work that he had completed recently that was entitled “Gure Aitaren Etxea”, or “Our Father’s House.” Placed near the Basques’ sacred oak tree in the town of Gernika, that sculpture was inspired by the poem “Nire Aitaren Etxea” or “My Father’s House” by Gabriel Aresti¹³ in which the poet pledges to defend his father’s homeland against possible enemies of Basque liberty. Txillida imagined the same sculpture on a Nevada hilltop oriented geodesically across the continent and the Atlantic Ocean to its counterpart in the Basque Country—said spiritual link commemorating that between the Basque homeland and its emigrant diaspora. The next day, Douglass took Txillida and his wife on a helicopter ride over the deserts south of Carson City, returning with the news that they had located a possible knoll for the sculpture.

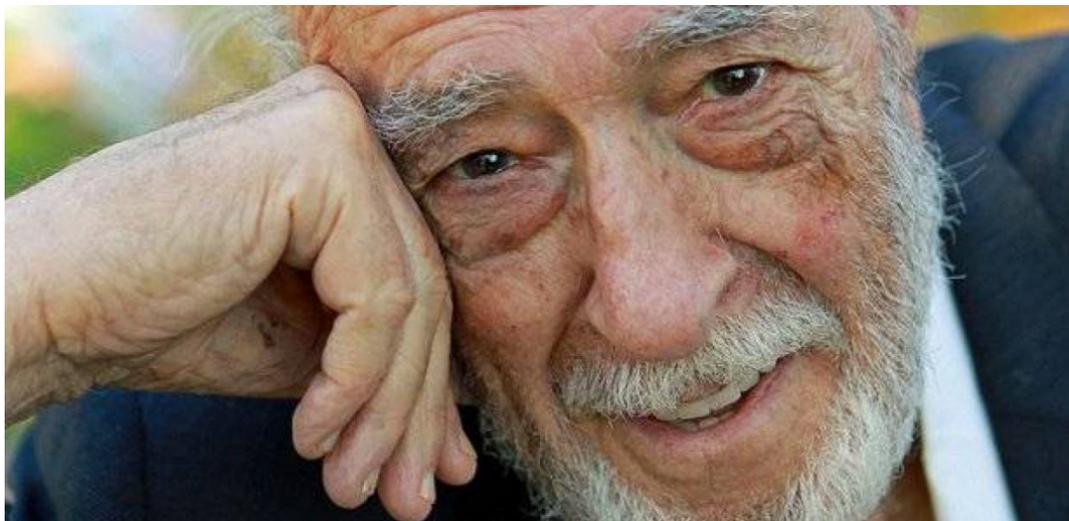
Unsurprisingly, other sculptors competing for the commission, as well as several members of the selection committee, were disturbed by the apparent usurpation of the project by Txillida’s supporters to build a copy of an existing sculpture. The objections resulted in the decision to invite Txillida formally to submit his design to the competition. It was only then that Eduardo became fully aware of the history. Unwilling to become a party to a possible scandalous controversy among Basque artists, he withdrew from consideration.

The committee continued its efforts by taking on the biggest challenge: fund-raising. It asked Janet Inda, an active leader of the Reno Basque community, and Nekane Oiarbide, a leader in Old World Basque cultural circles to head up the fund-raising on the opposite

¹³ Aresti, *Harri eta herri*, 44-45.

sides of the Atlantic.¹⁴ The strategy was two-pronged. First, the organizers were to seek funding from institutions, requesting several thousand dollars from each. There would be a donor's wall and the institutional ones would have a plaque in its center recognizing their support. Also, Basque Americans were asked to donate \$300 as individuals or families to place their name on a smaller plaque. It's not an easy matter to garner that much money from Basques, but the idea caught on. Many Basques Americans, and a few non-Basques as well, ponied up to honor the father, uncle, or grandfather who had come to this country to herd sheep. By 1988, Inda and Oiarbide had secured approximately \$350,000.

When it seemed certain that the project would become a reality, local art experts in Reno were asked to help select which of the three sculptures would be constructed first. In the event, the experts recommended that American artists be asked to enter the competition as well. Soon, nine American sculptors were competing with the three very unhappy Basque ones. Ironically, all nine U.S. artists presented figurative, traditional pieces and the three Old World artists presented abstract, modern ones. The mindset of the European artists surely derived from the avant-garde art scene existing in the Basque Country for the previous two or three decades, of which they were a part. Moreover, the Basque government, trying to stimulate an economy that was being revamped from rust-belt heavy industry to clean hi-tech, recognized an opportunity to use art to demonstrate the capacity to do so. Indeed, the Autonomous Basque Government paid for the printing of the brochure describing the project. In the event, the committee selected Nestor Basterretxea's *Solitude/Bakardade*. It also authorized founding of several small copies so that each committee member could have one in appreciation for having served.



Nestor Basterretxea (1924-2014)

¹⁴ Urza, *Solitude*, 38-40.

Another crisis averted

Finally, with the financing in place, the date for the inauguration was set: on August 27, 1989, coinciding with that of the annual festival of the Reno Zazpiak Bat Basque Club. Planning the inauguration at the same time as the festival would assure maximum Basque-American participation for the unveiling. European Basques, including important governmental officials, chartered an airplane to arrive a day or two before.

Basterretxea chose to have the sculpture rendered in Mexico City, at a foundry which still made large scale art works with the old-fashioned *cire-perdue* (or “lost wax”) process. Given the large scale of the sculpture, and the many complicated steps involved, combined with the Mexican cultural lack of appreciation for timelines, completion of the sculpture languished. Letters between the organizers in Reno, the sculptor, and the foundry were replaced by emails, and, finally, very frantic telephone calls. Perhaps two weeks before the inauguration, the sculpture was ready, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. A Mexican flatbed truck parked at the entrance of the foundry (U.S. trucks were not allowed at the time to enter Mexico), the (by one account, “somewhat tipsy”) crane operator lifted the sculpture and dropped it onto the street, breaking it in half! For the next 3 or 4 days, foundry workers dismantled part of the piece, adding internal reinforcement, and soldering it back together.

Finally, the truck was under way to the border, where it arrived a day or two later. There, Mexican customs demanded the much-dreaded *mordida*! For three days the negotiations burned through local and international telephone lines. In Laredo, those conversations included the Basterretxea Trucking Company from Mountain Home, Idaho. Its owner (no relative of Nestor) had donated the use of one of his trucks to await at the border so that the sculpture could be moved from the Mexican truck (which could not enter the U.S.) to an American one. After having a truck and driver idled for three or four days, Mr. Basterretxea was at his wits end and was justifiably threatening to leave.

Meanwhile, Nestor Basterretxea was working every friendship he had in Mexico to pressure Mexican border officials to allow the sculpture to leave the country. It was finally a former Basque *cesta punta* (*jai alai*) player that provided the necessary influence. This retired athlete had developed relationships associated with the Department of Interior, and he called in a huge favor to liberate the sculpture. The relief in Basterretxea voices (both the sculptor and the trucker) was palpable.

Now, the piece was on its way to Reno, only five days before the inauguration... Then the worry turned from if it would arrive on time, to whether the bolts on the cement base

(donated by CB Concrete in Reno) would match the holes in the base of the sculpture. Could last-minute site preparation be completed and the statue installed in time? Could the wine (thirty cases donated by the provincial government of Araba) and sheep's cheese (100 kilos provided by the Cooperativa Consejo Regulador Denominación de Queso Idiazabal) be kept cool until the event? Could sufficient parking be located for the few thousand spectators expected?

Three days before the inauguration, the sculpture arrived and was placed on the pedestal without incident. Douglass stored the wine and cheese in the cellar of his nearby residence. The University of Nevada committed parking on its campus half a mile away with an arranged shuttle service.

So, the Basque Monument was inaugurated on August 27 as planned, a ceremony attended by approximately 2,500 people, including the delegation from Europe. With the latter's presence, the differences between the "New" World (the American West) and the "Old" World (the Basque homeland) took on new meaning.

Basque immigration had largely ended in the 1950s, so most of the former herders had been in the West for at least 45-50 years by the time the monument was dedicated. Other Basque Americans were second or third generation descendants of earlier Basque immigrants. Many of these hyphenated Americans were still involved in farming and ranching in rural areas. Even urban-based Basque Americans were likely to emphasize their ancestral shepherd roots.

The immigrants and descendants of former herders continued to celebrate together their common culture through food and drink associated with the homeland. For example, many Basque boarding houses in sheep-raising areas served the iconic *picon* punch, a potent drink imported from *Iparalde* (the French Basque Country) in the 19th century. In the West, it was, and continues to be, the opening salvo of the meal to follow, even though it has virtually disappeared in France. Old-World folk dances had become ritualistic, an almost sacred activity at most gatherings, performed in colorful costumes by the children of Basque club members from the many small towns scattered across the West: Winnemucca, Ely, Elko, Gooding, Mountain Home, and so on. Basque Americans also exhibited their much-loved rural sports at their annual summer festivals.

In short, in these children of the Pyrenees there is ingrained an almost genetic memory of the Basque race. While transcending space, it was frozen in time. Immigrant Basque Americans had a fixed image of the rural Basque society and culture that they left behind half a century earlier. Descendants of even earlier immigrants shared a similar vision of the Basque Country imparted to them by their parents and grandparents.

Meanwhile, the Old-World Basques were on overdrive to make up for time lost during the Franco years. After Spain became a democracy, the governments of Basque cities and provinces moved quickly. Inexpensive public universities were created, resulting in legions of doctors, lawyers, and engineers speaking both Basque and Spanish, and perhaps French to boot. Deficiencies in infrastructure were addressed. New highways crisscrossed the mountainous terrain, significantly cutting travel time. New airports and seaports were built, and the old, polluting heavy industries were systematically eliminated and transitioned into clean, technologically advanced ones. The Basque Country went from being one of the poorer regions of Spain to one of its wealthiest.

Consequently, it was sophisticated urbanites and government representatives dressed in fashionable European formal attire who arrived in a shiny chartered airplane to dedicate this symbol of their culture on the knoll overlooking Reno. One imagines that they must have arrived on the flanks of Peavine that afternoon expecting to find a more advanced version of themselves in their Basque-American brethren. After all, the latter lived in the most modern country in the world—the land of Hollywood (Marilyn Monroe and James Dean), the towering skyscrapers of the financial districts of Manhattan and San Francisco, the first man on the moon!

The two culturally distinct groups of Basques eyed each other warily at first. The Europeans were surprised to find in their immigrant brethren the living reincarnation of their own rural-based fathers and grandfathers. It must have been a little disappointing to see that their culture was being projected as that of the humble and rustic sheepherder! Whereas, the traditional Basque Americans came dressed simply in the modest levies and shirts of most westerners. These products of a disappeared Old-World rural Basque universe must have had an Ichabod-Crane moment upon shaking with calloused hands the smooth, computer-sensitive ones of their visitors.

Did the two parties truly share the same culture and values? Nevertheless, like family members reunited after having long lost contact, embrace they did, warmly and tightly, mediated by an artist who reconciled the contemporary Old World with the traditional New World through execution and consecration of a shared icon.

Modern/Abstract versus Traditional/Representational art

No part of the project was as controversial and hotly debated as its artistic concept. The challenge was profound and complex. The monument was intended to memorialize with graphic medium the immigrant Basque herder, and, through him, all Basques—indeed, all

immigrants of the American experience. At the same time, it was intended to communicate to the American public the essence of a little-known ethnic group in its midst.

For some, the medium was as important as the concept itself. Art appreciation is a very personal matter filtered through individual taste formed by education and a lifetime of experience. There was fear that the average Nevadan or Basque American would not appreciate a contemporary, abstract piece. Lacking the necessary background and sophistication to understand and esteem such artistic expression, would the relevant public not prefer a more recognizable representational or figurative rendering of the sheepherder? Wouldn't that be more faithful to the Basque immigrant experience?

Robert Laxalt, a member of the committee, pointed out in a letter to José Ramón that not everybody appreciates abstract sculpture. Indeed, "there is a practical strain in the Basques that clings hard to the traditional. Opposition from these Basques may hurt your fund-raising efforts.... Basque herders are a traditional people, shouldn't the artistic tribute to them be a mirror image of them. Why shouldn't it look like a sheepherder?"¹⁵

Several contributors expressed their similar artistic sentiments when mailing in their contribution. Laure Irigaray, for example, concluded her letter by opining: "The drawing of the entire monument looks very impressive, but many of us can't exactly make out the sculpture of the shepherd. Where is the shepherd's head? Hope the finished production will appear better than it does in the drawing. Good luck to all of you."¹⁶

In short, many Basque Americans envisioned the herder in denims, a long-sleeved shirt, boots, tousled hair, and perhaps with a hat and a dog. Why build a monument in which you can't recognize who or what is honored without reading the plaque? An abstract modern sculpture would only serve as a pigeon roost.

Proponents of the abstract design countered that "we know what a herder looks like, we don't need a figurative statue to tell us." The only discussion a traditional piece would stimulate would be over the kind of hat or boots the herders might have worn. The purpose of the monument was to draw attention to the concept invoked, rather than depicted, so that it remains a viable and interesting art piece open to interpretation. After all, the monument was not only for people alive today, but for future generations as well. Why build it for the 21st century using the imagery of the 19th one?

The Statue of Liberty, for example, was a symbol whose meaning went far beyond the

¹⁵ Robert Laxalt, personal communication. Laxalt's ambivalence in this regard (he supported Txillida's proposal as well) was everyone's dilemma writ small.

¹⁶ Urza, *Solitude*, 35.

image of a woman holding a torch. Its significance was, and continues to be, its openness to countless interpretations and controversies. Controversy is far more desirable than indifference. Controversy was the essence of the importance (and success) of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

The last thing those in favor of a modern medium wanted was a sculpture with little intrinsic artistic value, understanding art to be originality. Those leaning in this direction felt that the Basque Monument should be audacious. If the viewers were perplexed, and had to research the piece and the artist, so much the better. Besides, some argued, representational art is boring. There were already thousands of statues of generals who nobody remembers, and which only serve as roosting places for pigeons!

Perhaps Basterretxea said it best in his speech during the inauguration ceremony: “We are in the last years of the twentieth century, and no matter how archaic and rustic the character of the shepherd, I don’t see a reason to abandon our own artistic form of expression as modern men. It would, in fact, be unjust to reduce the personality of the shepherd to a portrait determined by the simple sum of external appearances: for example, by his manner of dress. In the end, a beret or hat on his head and the boots on his feet, do not make a herder. A herder is much more than a man dressed as a herder.”¹⁷

The Basque Monument as communication

There are more elements to the Basque Monument than the sculpture. In front of it there is a rendition of a map of the United States on which the principal areas of Basque settlement are highlighted. There was a walking trail in the sagebrush surrounding the monument so that it could be perceived from every angle. Along this path were four reader boards with text authored by Douglass describing the Basque homeland and its inhabitants’ unique culture and language, as well as the history of their emigration to the American West. The fourth board was a paean to Robert Laxalt’s *Sweet Promised Land* and its importance to Basque-American identity.¹⁸ To one side, there is a walled structure bearing the donors’ plaques. Finally, on the base of the platform beneath the sculpture there is the text of a poem written by Bastarretxea in Basque and its English translation:

IRUDIA

HAIZEAK ZIZELKATUA BAILITZAN

GIZONA

A FIGURE

AS IF SCULPTED BY THE WIND ITSELF

A SOLITARY AND STRONG MAN

¹⁷ Urza, *Solitude*, 27-28.

¹⁸ The path is now grown over and the reader boards no longer exist, having become illegible after decades of unrelenting weather and acid from the droppings of perching birds.

BAKARTI ETA SENDOA	STANDING TALL BY HIS OWN SHEER
LERDEN BERE GOGOAN.	WILL
LAINGILE ADORETSUA.	PATIENT WORKER
MENTURAREN OSTERTZ LAUSOAREN	FACING THE UNCERTAIN HORIZON
AURREAN.	OF ADVENTURE.
ILARGIA ETA IZARRAK LAGUN.	ENDLESS SILENT STRETCHES
ISILALDI AMAIGABEAK.	OVER MOUNTAIN TRAILS
MENDI-BIDEETAN BARRENA.	UNDER MOON AND STARS
BETIEREKO OROIPEN ETA GORA	THIS MOUNUMENT
ZARREZ	IS AN ETERNAL HOMAGE TO
EUSKAL ARTZAINAREN MONUMENTUA.	THE BASQUE SHEEPHERDER.

Bastarretxea's sculpture is a compromise of sorts, a post-modernistic expression that combines the elements from Modernism and Realism. Because of this dual nature, the Monument is doubly coded: accessible and inaccessible, superficial and profound.

There are obvious symbols in the sculpture. Bastarretxea told us that, since the site is on a knoll, he designed the sculpture originally to be placed under a cliff, so that the man would appear to emerge from the earth: "AS IF SCULPTED BY THE WIND ITSELF." He added a rectangular backdrop representing the earth with etching that evokes the solar system. The very topmost feature of the statue is a disc that represents the moon. Both the etching and the disc are symbolic of the natural world in which the herder lived. It is an abstract, symbolic way of communicating that these men did not live in a city, with its artificial lights and manicured streets, but rather trod: "ENDLESS SILENT STRETCHES OVER MOUNTAIN TRAILS UNDER MOON AND STARS." The symbols may also allude to the ancient pantheistic beliefs of the Basque people. In the words of Luis de Barandarián: "The ancient Basques maintained a constant dialogue with nature."¹⁹

This sculpture is not made of fragile porcelain, nor is it finely detailed or agile. It does not draw in the viewer; it projects no humor. Rather, it is austere, overwhelming, and distancing. It is carved as a monolithic structure from which there emerges a man, albeit one with fragmented features and a hollow face. The arms are disproportionately large and dense. These are not the legs of a sprinter or a ballet star. They are the limbs of someone who will be there tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. They are legs that carry him when they scarcely can, because his mind wills them to: "STANDING TALL BY HIS OWN SHEER WILL." The Basque monument expresses the ideology of a culture, of a people,

¹⁹ Barandarián, *A View from the Witch's Cave*, 3.

giving heroic dimension to the spirit and animus of men who are willing to silently test their mettle to the utmost. A man and a people with these values will be able to adapt to any exigency, applying their single-mindedness to any task: “FACING THE UNCERTAIN HORIZON OF ADVENTURE.”

One reading of the symbolism would underscore the essence of Basque culture. Shepherding entails a world view that implies hard work, responsibility, and constancy: “PATIENT WORKER”. Day after day, the herder was required to remain in the wilderness in care of his charges, placing enormous demands not only upon his physical strength but also on his mental stamina and spirit. Bastarretxea, the poet, underscores that the herder is: “A SOLITARY AND STRONG MAN” (“GIZONA BAKARTI ETA SENDOA”).²⁰ He is the incarnation of the strength required to withstand the physical challenges of living in the mountains and deserts of the American West, while mustering the mental and emotional wherewithal to withstand the solitude—the absence of family, wife, fiancée, friends, church and village. The very name of the monument, “Bakardade/Solitude,” reflects the importance of this missing Old-World social context.

On the figure’s shoulders, there is etched the outline of a lamb. Our shepherd is protecting, nurturing, and watching over his charges. He carries the lost lamb back to its mother; or, despite his personal solitude, nevertheless provides companionship to a “bummer” or orphan. Strength and endurance, yet tempered by tenderness.

A project revisited

In the event, Barkadade was chosen by a five to four vote of the committee. Subsequently, proponents of a figurative sculpture launched their own initiative, spearheaded by John Ascuaga, owner of the Sparks Nugget Casino (site of that first National Basque Festival in 1959). Shortly after the inauguration of the Bastarretxea monument, Mr. Ascuaga invited Carmelo to lunch to discuss the possibility of commissioning his own sculpture to be placed at the Nugget. He asked if such an endeavor would offend the organizers of Bakardade? Urza didn’t think so, and told him that the more the expressions of Basque culture the better.

Ascuaga had been particularly impressed by the design that Douglas Van Howd, an Auburn (California) artist, submitted for the consideration of the Monument committee. It was a simple rendering of a shepherd, orphan lamb in arms, and his faithful dog. Van Howd’s work was well-known and liked in northern Nevada. His sculpture of a skier adorns the

²⁰ Douglass and Bilbao, *Amerikanuak*, 407-11.

entrance to the Reno airport and his wolves (UNR's mascot) greet visitors at the entrance of Mackay Stadium.

So, John Ascuaga negotiated with Van Howd and they agreed on the price of \$175,000 for the larger-than-life, 10-foot outdoor sculpture—to be called simply “The Shepherd.” The Nugget already had a bit of interior Basque theming in the guise of its Basque Bar and forthcoming Orozco Restaurant (named for the Ascuagas’ hometown in Bizkaia). The base was erected at the same time and by the same company that was doing the stonework of the Orozco. The statue was designed to be placed within a niche on one of the exterior corners of the casino building. It was the first thing that visitors would see when driving off the freeway into the Nugget complex. There were also much smaller copies cast by the artist, one of which was placed next to the hostess station where guests checked into the hotel. On August 4, 1998, like for the earlier Bakardade one, there was a public inauguration of a second Basque sheepherder monument. It was a far more local event that was attended by a few hundred participants.



The second Basque sheepherder statue, now at the University of Nevada, Reno.

By 2013, the Nugget was in financial difficulty and the Ascuagas sold the property. The new owners had little interest in retaining a Basque theme, and they closed the Orozco Restaurant. The future of the Van Howd sculpture was in doubt—a source of constant concern for John Ascuaga. In 2016, the Nugget was sold again, this time to Marnell Casinos, Inc., based in Las Vegas. It was then that the Advisory Board of the William A. Douglass Center for Basque Studies at UNR, chaired at the time by John's daughter Michonne, initiated the idea of acquiring the Nugget's sculpture for the university and placing it near the entrance of the Knowledge Center (Library) where the Basque Center is housed.

As it happened, William Douglass had a personal connection with the new owners. While an owner in Reno's Club Cal Neva during the 1980s, he was sent by his father to meet with Anthony Marnell, Jr. in Wendover to consider entering into a joint venture to purchase the (at that time) closed Red Garter Casino. It didn't happen, and Marnell Casinos went on to build its flagship property (the Rio) in Las Vegas.

When it was announced that Marnell Casinos had purchased the Sparks Nugget, Douglass contacted its president, Anthony Marnell, III (his father was deceased) and requested a meeting during Tony's next trip to Reno. Douglass suggested to the new owner that he could probably get a tax write-off for donating the statue to UNR, not to mention free favorable publicity for the Nugget as well. Marnell agreed, and suggested that the details be worked out with his attorney and accountant. Bart Mowry, member of the Basque Center's Advisory Board, served as liaison for the transaction.

Nevertheless, the actual transfer was more complicated than might have been anticipated. The CBS had to ensure the university that it would cover all of the costs of preparing a site on campus and transferring the monument to it. It was necessary to prepare a proposal and budget that had to be approved by several university committees and officials. That alone took more than a year, and would have been longer had not University President Marc Johnson thrown his support behind the project.

The Center raised a few thousand dollars from individual donors, far from what was necessary. However, there was a remarkable outpouring of in-kind support from a number of local businesses. The crane for removing and then resituating the statue, the many rubber tires need to cushion it during the transfer so it wouldn't break (shades of Bakardade's fate in Mexico City!), site design, testing of the soil, construction of a cement base, and irrigation and landscaping were all donated, as well as Van Howd's offer to come to Reno to clean the statue and oversee its installation—services that altogether would have cost in the tens of thousands of dollars. The owner of Savage and Sons Plumbing, Len, himself half-Basque, and Dave Elizondo of Northern Nevada Concrete, Inc. assumed the point. The statue had to be removed by February of 2020, or well before site preparation at

UNR had begun. So, it was moved and then stored by Savage. The inauguration was further delayed by the closure of the UNR campus throughout much of 2020 and 2021 due to Covid.

On September 8, 2021, a couple of hundred people gathered to celebrate the installation of The Shepherd in its new home next to UNR's Knowledge Center. Appropriately, it was also the "Day of the Diaspora" that was being celebrated in the Basque homeland and throughout its emigrant diaspora. There was the standard fare at Basque gatherings (txorixos on bread, cheese and potato omelet, and red wine). Sadly, John Ascuaga and his wife Rose had both passed away during the previous year. In a sense, their presence was felt as the inauguration became a memorial to their memory—particularly underscored in the two speeches of their children, Stephen and Michonne).

Monumental neighbors

In one of the many ironies in this world, all of the elements in this story now reside within a few blocks of one another. The Bakardade statue sits on its hilltop. Its green color has faded somewhat with exposure to the elements and there has been vandalism. Fortunately, the Washoe County Parks system has restored the Monument to its original state. Today, it stands prouder than ever, set amidst mature landscaping.

Furthermore, Rancho San Rafael officials have created a Basque exhibit in its main visitors' area, complete with a sheep wagon, bread oven, and *arri mutilla* (stone boy). It, too, has readers' boards on which Douglass has replicated the information that was on the former Bakardade ones.

The Center for Basque Studies is located within the Jon Bilbao Basque Library on the second level of the Knowledge Center, but a scant couple of hundred yards from the Van Howd statue. On a first-floor wall facing the CBS's balcony vestibule on the second is Bastarretxea's Orreaga sculpture. The central feature of the vestibule itself, and the first thing one sees on exiting the elevator to enter the Jon Bilbao Library, is Remigio Mendiburu's Gastelu. Both of these wooden pieces that were first exhibited in the 1984 Chicago Exposition are on permanent loan from the Cengotitabengoa family (it retains the Larrea metal piece which is exhibited outside the family home in Illinois).²¹ Inside the CBS, there is a maquette of an earlier version of Bakardade, given to it by Nestor. While still

²¹ The design that Larrea submitted to the Monument Committee was entitled Makila ("Walking Stick"). While it did not win, it was subsequently constructed as public art in Sondika (Bizkaia) near the entrance to the Leioa/Bilbao airport.

editor of the Basque Book Series of the University of Nevada Press, Douglass published Carmelo Urza's book *Bakardade/Solitude*.

So, now we have two metallic shepherders guarding their herds less than a mile apart. Like the human ones on the open range, they avoid coming too close to one another to prevent mixing their bands. In this fashion, they avoid contesting and contaminating one another's artistic preference as well. Yet, still and all, both commemorate the same historical personage.

We might conclude by considering its personification as reported in an article published in Nevada's *Goldfield Times* on the 8th of April of 1910: "Back in the frigid hills of Humboldt County the remains of a shepherd were found the other day. He was only a Basque or a common shepherd whose services were at the command of the big sheep companies for a nominal monthly stipend. The poor boy undaunted by inclement weather had insisted on venturing back to the range in spite of a blizzard and set forth with a couple of packhorses to reach his destination. This was months ago. Within the past week the shriveled remains denuded of flesh by the mountain varmints were found. They could only be identified by the shreds of documents held in leash by the pockets of the faded clothing. Nothing could be done. (...) Only a Basque shepherd found in the snow lifeless and sodden in the clasp of an inexorable winter but true to the duty and as consistent in his faith as the soldier who harks forth to the wars inspired by the blare of trumpets and the cheers of multitudes. When the last roll is called and the spirit of the humble Basque shepherd shall respond to the trumpet his soul shall appear wreathed in all the glory of heroism to claim his reward at the throne."

Other archetypes of the American West: the cowboy, Native American, soldier, miner, and trapper have frequently been represented heroically in literature, painting, and sculpture. Basterretxea and Van Howd have elevated the representation of the normally humble, simple, archaic Basque herder into its own (and our) heroic figure.

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