

# AUTHENTICATION IN ART

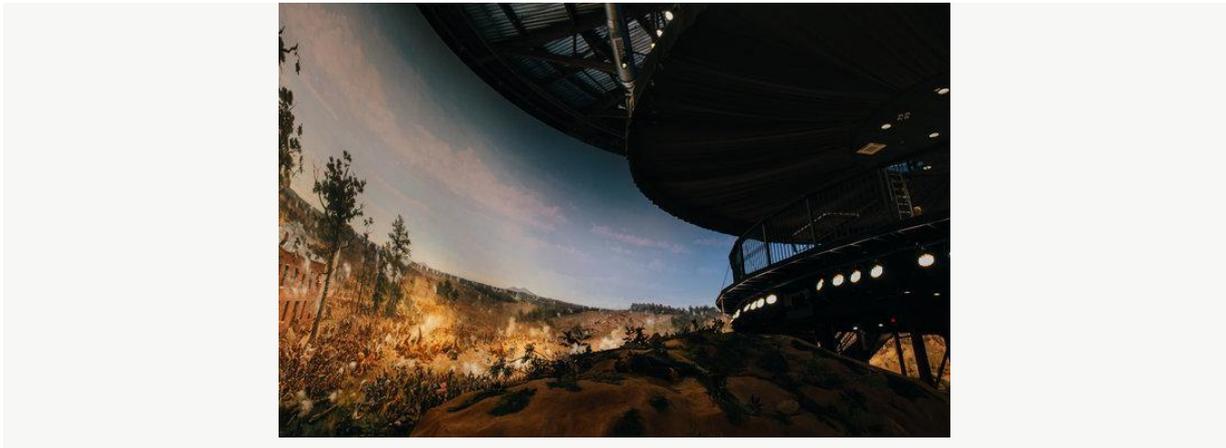
AiA Art News-service

**The New York Times**

## A Victory for the Civil War ‘Cyclorama’

A colossal painting, once claimed to depict a Confederate victory, has carried an evolving meaning. Now, a spectacular restoration at the Atlanta History Center unravels its complex tale.

“The Battle of Atlanta,” created by the American Panorama Company in 1886, features an encounter between Union and Confederate soldiers. The Atlanta History Center raised \$35 million for a new building to house it and restore it to public view. Credit Diwang Valdez for The New York Times



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**By Holland Cotter**

- Feb. 21, 2019

ATLANTA — If you had visited Atlanta in the early 1960s, you would have found drinking fountains labeled “Colored” and “White.” Driving into the city from the airport today you pass signs for Ralph David Abernathy Freeway, Andrew Young International Boulevard, John Lewis Freedom Parkway. As in the country at large, there have been big changes.

How deep are the changes? Nationally, militant whiteness is out in the open again. Our president is trying to inscribe a color line across our southern border. So politically split are the citizens of Fort America that it sometimes feels like a new kind of civil war is brewing.

These tensions have played out symbolically in skirmishes over the fate of historical monuments, specifically [public sculptures memorializing the Confederacy](#). Should we trash them or keep them? Annotate them or let them be? With the recent reappearance in Atlanta of a depiction of a fateful 1864 Union-Confederate encounter, there’s yet another loaded image to consider.

This monument, called “The Battle of Atlanta,” is different from many of the others. For one thing, it’s not a sculpture; it’s a colossal oil painting: 49 feet high, as long as a football field, and conceived as a cyclorama, a wraparound environment for 360-degree viewing. And unlike many commemorative statues, its political affiliation — Union, Confederate — has shifted over time, depending on where the painting was shown and who was looking.

Cycloramas were the IMAX of their day, a form of popular, pay-at-the-door entertainment in the second half of the 19th century. Like movies, they dramatized and romanticized epic events: wars, natural disasters, biblical stories. Unlike a film, the cyclorama image was in most cases stationary: The picture didn’t move; the eyes of the audience did.



One of the dozens of plaster soldier figures added to the diorama surface during the 1934-36 restoration of “The Battle of Atlanta.” Credit Diwang Valdez for The New York Times



The diorama, in its current form, augmented the giant painting with some 3-D figures in 1936. Credit Diwang Valdez for The New York Times

About three-fourths of “The Battle of Atlanta” depicts Union soldiers surging forward in a counterattack against Confederate forces. Credit Diwang Valdez for The New York Times



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Produced in 1886 in Milwaukee by a commercial outfit called the [American Panorama Company](#), in a workshop staffed by immigrant German and Austrian artists, “The Battle of Atlanta” was one of dozens of cycloramas traveling the country at the time. (Only two survive intact; the other depicts [the Battle of Gettysburg](#).) Like Hollywood films, they were meant to be thrilling and fun, though this one was also an instrument of propaganda.

The Battle of Atlanta had been a close-call Union win, though what we see in the painting is an effortless victory: a surging maelstrom of blue-uniformed Union troops; pockets of gray-jacketed Confederate soldiers huddled in defeat. The image was geared to a Northern audience, and the cyclorama traveled a Midwest circuit — Minneapolis, Indianapolis — until its creators suddenly declared bankruptcy and put it up for sale.

The buyer was [a Georgia entrepreneur named Paul Atkinson](#), who wanted to bring the cyclorama to Atlanta itself, but knew he had to change it if he did. So, in a blatant act of fake-news making, he flipped the story. He had the Union uniforms recolored

gray, and the Confederate uniforms painted blue. In a scene showing the capture of a Confederate flag, the flag was painted out. He advertised “The Battle of Atlanta” as a Confederate victory.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

Apparently the ploy brought in customers but didn't produce the hit he'd hoped for. In 1893, he sold the painting, cheap, to another speculator, who passed it on to a third, who donated it to the city of Atlanta. The city installed it in Grant Park near the local zoo, and in too small a space. For the picture to fit, three sections had to be sliced off.

Created by the Atlanta sculptors Joseph V. Llorens and Weis Snell, this is one of 128 plaster figures added during the 1934-36 restoration and was funded in part by the Works Progress Administration. Credit Diwang Valdez for The New York Times



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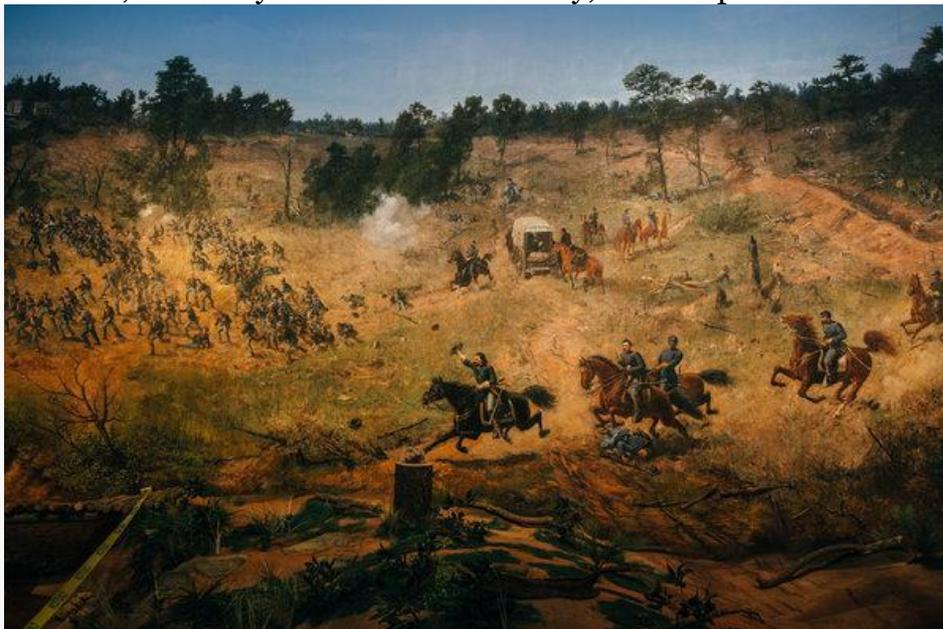
In 1939, the cyclorama finally had a moment of public glory, when some of the stars of “Gone With the Wind,” in town for the film's world premiere, paid a ceremonial visit. By that time, Atkinson's rewrite of military victory had been abandoned. The original uniform colors had been restored, and a diorama of three-dimensional

plaster figures of soldiers had been placed in front of the painting to enhance 3-D illusionism.

But also by then, a new narrative spin had been introduced. Yes, the South had lost the Battle of Atlanta, and with it the war, but it had also scored a moral victory. The story was now of a people's honorable defeat in defense of family and home, of a South brought down in flames, then rising, phoenixlike, from the ashes. From this perspective, the cyclorama was a war memorial, a tribute to principled courage, a lament for a noble "Lost Cause."

What made this sanguine reading of the cyclorama possible was not so much what was in the painting as in what was left out: the human cost. Some 600,000 American combatants died in the war. Eyewitness accounts, and battlefield photographs of bloated, disfigured bodies, indicate that many died terrible deaths. But little sense of this brutality comes through in the painting, which, for all its scenographic detail, is almost gore-free.

Its sanitized take on combat was in line with postwar revisionist thinking promoted by the so-called Reconciliation movement, a retrospective view of the conflict, widespread in both North and South, that glossed over its staggering wasteful violence, and saw it instead as a kind of finest-hour military adventure, in which enemies, united by their devotion to duty, ended up brothers-in-arms.



The most prominent figure in the cyclorama is Maj. Gen. John A. Logan, seen here leading the Union counterattack on his black horse. Credit Diwang Valdez for The New York Times



Only five of the plaster figures of soldiers represent Confederate forces. The man standing is modeled on Charles K. Henderson, a surviving Confederate veteran in his 90s when the soldiers were added to the diorama in the 1930s. Credit Diwang Valdez for The New York Times



Three-dimensional soldiers added to the display were intended to heighten the illusion. It's hard to tell where the diorama ends and the painting begins. Credit Diwang Valdez for The New York Times

Of all the painted figures, only one man is discernibly black, in a red shirt on a horse. Credit Diwang Valdez for The New York Times



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In this fantasy, virtually all the “brothers” were white, and so they are in the painting. Of some 6,000 figures in the cyclorama, only one — set far back from the action, barely visible but clearly noncombatant — is African-American. And in real life, enforcing black invisibility would be a white obsession. When the “Gone With the Wind” cast visited the cyclorama, the film’s black performers were not invited. In a segregated Atlanta, Grant Park was off-limits to black citizens into the 1950s.

The physical absence of black figures points to an even more far-reaching suppression: a denial that slavery and the intense, continuous black fight for liberation were primary motivators of the war itself. The refusal to acknowledge this reality bolstered white supremacy and contributed to continuing racial oppression in the form of Jim Crow laws, through the following century.

During the 1960s and ’70s, “The Battle of Atlanta” languished in semi-obscurity. In 1979, the city’s first black mayor, [Maynard Jackson](#), acknowledged the importance of its subject — “It’s one battle where the right side won,” he said — and ordered a conservation effort. In 2014, one of his successors, [Kasim Reed](#), signed the cyclorama over to the [Atlanta History Center](#) for safekeeping.

The Center, led by its president, [Sheffield Hale](#), who has memories of visiting the cyclorama as a child, raised \$35 million for a new building to house it on the campus. There, restored to its original size (the deleted sections have been recreated from artists' studies and 1886 photographs) and accompanied by the 1930s sculptural diorama, the painting has returned to public view.



An escalator delivers visitors to the broad vista of the 49-foot-tall painting. Credit Diwang Valdez for The New York Times

The central scene of the painting shows Troup Hurt's house on July 22, 1864, at a decisive moment in the battle, with Union troops poised to overwhelm Confederate forces. White Southerners interpreted the painting differently, preferring to emphasize the valor of their soldiers defending their position. The exhibition unravels truth from fiction.



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Now well over a century old, it still makes for effective theater. After entering the circular space through a tunnel and ascending a short escalator, you get a sudden, sweeping, horizon-level view of the painting and diorama below. You can then descend to floor level, where you can check out the stage mechanics (the steel weights that keep the painting's surface taut, for example) and examine the painting and sculptures close up. Masterpieces, they're not. The figures, executed by artists on the W.P.A. rolls, are roughly formed and summarily colored. The style of the painting might be described as a mix of Romantic realism and deadline-Impressionism: The whole thing was finished, in what seem to have been long, beer-fueled sessions, in a matter of weeks.

Wisely, the Center doesn't treat the cyclorama as art, entertainment or monument. It presents it as a dynamic artifact of the past with complicated information for the present. Indeed, the really interesting aspect of the cyclorama in its new home at the Center is the way it is documented, interpreted, and explained.

Gordon L. Jones, the Center's senior military historian, has scrupulously researched its specific history, nested that history within the context of other histories, social and political, and laid out his findings in an adjoining gallery. The most radical

commentary, though, is inside the cyclorama itself. It comes in a series of myth-puncturing wall texts on the causes and effects of the Civil War and the propaganda it produced, and, in a short video projected onto the painting's surface, insists on the need for vigilance in separating history from fiction.

That separation is, as we know from the truth-doctoring of the present moment, an elusive one. Maybe it has always been. The hopeful news is that our history museums, particularly, lately, those in the South, are acknowledging this, and going for truth. Their basic premise is plain: history doesn't change, we change, and we'd better start now.