Introduction

Call it promotional, call it sentimental, call it modern alchemy. This is the story of the complex and at times mystifying processes that transformed three objects in powerful ways around the turn of the twenty-first century. As the city of Philadelphia underwent an important pivot in its identity and reputation, historical art became contemporary, private art became public, and a painting, a sculpture, and an entire art collection—already famous for other reasons—came to speak uniquely for the city where they were displayed. This book is about preexisting items made anew, changed through acts of reception: through the ways that viewers looked at these objects, talked about these objects, and used these objects to define their city around the year 2000.

The objects in question were the subjects of the most intense and wide-reaching public conversations about visual culture in Philadelphia that occurred between approximately 1990 and 2010. These spirited exchanges erupted on call-in radio shows, in newspaper columns, at public hearings, and, eventually, on blogs and in website comments sections. They ostensibly revolved around determining the appropriate location for three key items: the art collection under the stewardship of the Barnes Foundation; Thomas Eakins’s 1875 painting, The Gross Clinic; and a statue of fictional boxer Rocky Balboa that was made in 1980 as a prop for a Hollywood film.

Although these three pieces were not initially linked in any formal way, they eventually became both symbolically and spatially connected. When
people discussed whether and where to display these items, they participated in crucial dialogues about how to balance the city’s celebrated historic past with its more recently acquired negative image in order to shape the Philadelphia of the future. Through these negotiations, Philadelphia and its public image changed. The objects at the center of these conversations changed as well. Physically, they each found long-term homes along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, a mile-long boulevard that leads from City Hall to the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Figure I.1). Functionally, they took on new roles in representing Philadelphia. They contributed to shifting the city’s identity from one rooted in challenges to one rooted in cultural achievements.

In many ways late twentieth-century Philadelphia was a far cry from the popular image of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century city as an impressive center of artistic, scientific, and political achievement. Its standing as one of the country’s foremost cultural centers declined nearly a hundred years ago when New York emerged as a hub of American modernism filled with artists, museums, and galleries dedicated to testing the limits of creative expression. After World War II, Philadelphia encountered political and economic difficulties brought about by deindustrialization, failed public policies, and population shifts. Many white middle-class residents fled to the suburbs in an escape from what they viewed as a collapsing city. Some locals and outsiders came to see Philadelphia as a sleepy town marred by political corruption. Others regarded the city as a gritty urban expanse with crumbling infrastructure, high crime rates, and stark racial and class divisions. While many American cities struggled during the second half of the twentieth century, these images of Philadelphia in decline struck a particularly sharp contrast with the lingering vision of the city’s former prominence.1

Philadelphians who possessed political, financial, or cultural power had long been invested in promoting a more positive image of their city to reframe and (in some cases) combat its problems. Around the year 2000, efforts to represent the city as a thriving metropolis worthy once again of national acclaim took hold more powerfully than they had in the past. A significant portion of that shift involved positioning Philadelphia as an internationally relevant center of culture, with offerings in the arts that could entice visitors from around the world. Although the challenges of helping Philadelphians be safe, informed, and financially stable persisted, they became less visible in the city’s public image.2 Philadelphia’s new reputation, reflected in the way that locals and outsiders talked about the city, revolved instead around a set of ostensibly less daunting challenges: interpreting the city’s present and past,
Figure I.1. Map of Philadelphia, featuring the locations of the Barnes collection, The Gross Clinic, and the Rocky statue. (Created by Laura Holzman, 2018.)
defining what makes art accessible, and simultaneously honoring Philadelphia’s resources in the fine arts and its recognizability in popular culture.

When scholar Richardson Dilworth reflected on Philadelphia’s reputation in 2012, he explained that “a big city’s reputation is of course always a fiction in that it cannot describe much of what actually happens in such a large place, but it is also very real in that it sets people’s expectations and defines their shared understanding of the community in which they live and work, and which others visit—or choose not to visit, as the case may be.” Accordingly, Philadelphia’s reputation relied on a combination of concrete and symbolic factors. It emerged from efforts that were both official and unofficial, deliberate and happenstance.

Much of the official momentum for reinvigorating Philadelphia’s image around the turn of the century grew out of revitalization efforts launched in the 1990s. State and federally funded initiatives sought to create jobs and housing throughout the city. Like other American cities, many of Philadelphia’s programs focused on making the Center City District appealing to businesses and tourists. Planning projects and tax incentives aimed to attract investors to Center City, while publicity campaigns promoted Philadelphia’s historic district, cultural establishments, and nightlife. Although these projects had mixed results, leaders interpreted the successes as helping return Philadelphia to its former status as a vital urban center.

At the same time, individuals who lived and worked in the region participated in less-formal efforts to determine Philadelphia’s reputation. This book focuses primarily on unofficial aspects of Philadelphia’s turn-of-the-twenty-first-century image management. The conversations about where to locate the Barnes collection, The Gross Clinic, and the Rocky statue intersected with the city’s official efforts to boost local spirit and reshape Philadelphia’s reputation, but they were also broader, more organic, and more impassioned than those initiatives. Competing voices from across and beyond Philadelphia raised important, if often unspoken, questions that pointed to the fraught relationships between city and suburb, past and present, and high and low. Rather than debating the merits of Philadelphia’s reputation shift, participants in these conversations helped establish how culture would be included in the city’s new image. In doing so, they rendered three historic items powerful tools for defining Philadelphia’s future.

Studying the discourse that surrounded three objects deemed of high local importance offers an opportunity to think more carefully about the ways in which a region’s cultural resources affect its reputation. Many books and articles have approached this task by focusing on places such as New
York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Philadelphia’s stories, which reflect the
different shape of that city’s history, have much to contribute to the existing
landscape of scholarship. This book, however, is not just about expanding
the scope of understanding to include the unique circumstances of another
American city. Beyond the specific ramifications for Philadelphia and the
three objects in question, the conversations I examine here illuminate the
messy process of public envisioning of place. They chart the ways in which
public dialogue shapes public meaning—of cities and of the objects that
inform urban identity.

Pictures for the City

Image. In this word, character and reputation fuse with the visual. When
Kevin Lynch published *The Image of the City*, his foundational urban design
study, in 1960, he was concerned with how people visualized a city based on
their experiences in the urban environment. For him, a navigable city was a
legible city, and one that held the potential to produce strong symbolic asso-
ciations for those who encountered it. Others who have taken up the question
of city images have focused not on the built environment but on depictions
of that environment and the messages they convey about its character. As an
abstract sense of place, a city’s “image” can be rooted in the appearance of the
place, someone’s experience of the place, or representations of the place. It can
be derived from factors that are material or intangible, observed or imagined.

When images and objects work on behalf of a city, when they actively
shape its identity, they become pictures for the city. “Picture” broadly signifies
the act of representation, both concretely and abstractly. “Picture” can mean
“photograph,” or it can refer to an idea, a concept, or an impression. (Get the
picture?) When we call someone “the picture of health” or “the picture of evil,”
a person is a picture. Describing something—a painting, a sculpture, a collec-
tion of objects—as a “picture for the city” emphasizes its role in representing
the place. Around the year 2000, pictures for the city enabled Philadelphians
to reassess the region’s history, navigate contemporary urban life, and imagine
what their city could become.

When I refer to “pictures for the city,” I aim to describe a fluid set of im-
ages and objects that define, in this case, Philadelphia. This grouping extends
beyond a basic collection of mimetic illustrations of Philadelphia’s residents,
built environment, and natural resources. It includes as well items that, over
time, come to represent and recast that less-tangible element of city spirit.
Pictures for the city—not just those *of* and *about* it—can make meaningful
statements about Philadelphia regardless of where they were made or what subject they show. Items transition into and out of this category based on the conditions of their use.8

That use can take a range of familiar forms. When a sports broadcast shows footage of the skyline in the home team’s city before cutting to a commercial break, that skyline is a picture for the city. When a painting by a local artist appears in the city’s tourism campaign, that painting is a picture for the city. When the mayor makes a speech about the future of the city while standing in front of a public monument, that monument is a picture for the city. When a survey exhibition takes the pulse of a city’s contemporary art scene, the pieces on view—individually and taken together—are pictures for the city. When images and objects provide a visual anchor for people’s ideas about an urban place, they become pictures for the city.

Pictures for the city reflect a symbiotic relationship between object and place, where the meanings of each are negotiated simultaneously. For that reason, pictures for the city can easily become tied to reevaluating the balance of negative and positive impressions of a city. Similarly, because of their role in representing place, pictures for the city can become flashpoints for examining or suppressing societal tensions. While the pictures for the city that I examine here were associated with efforts to present a more positive image of Philadelphia, the discourse surrounding them concerned some difficult matters typically omitted from boosterish promotional materials, such as questioning where in the region cultural attractions belong, who shapes cultural memory, and which aspects of the city’s visual culture deserve to be recognized in its public image.

The most potent pictures for the city become city icons. They emerge as such when their status becomes so deeply intertwined with their ability to represent a place that the two appear inextricably linked. For art historian Martin Kemp, truly iconic images (like the *Mona Lisa* or a Coca-Cola bottle) have “transgressed the parameters of [their] initial making, function, context, and meaning.”9 While this trait is not required for a city icon, it is a key attribute of each of the pictures for the city in this book. Part of what makes the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue so compelling are the ways in which they became unhinged from, and, in some cases, later rehinged to, their original function.

One of the most recognizable pictures for the city in Philadelphia is Robert Indiana’s sculpture *LOVE* (Figure I.2). Based on a design from 1964, it is a work of bold simplicity, with the capital letters L, O, V, and E stacked in a square prism that packs a powerful one-two punch of universality and
specificity. Many viewers, including scholars and Indiana himself, discuss LOVE as a networked project that exists outside of a fixed time and place. Like the amorous feeling, which strikes many people but in different ways, Indiana’s design has abundant manifestations—including as a greeting card, a postage stamp, and a series of sculptures. Even though LOVE appears in towns and on T-shirts across the globe, it has also acquired deep and distinct associations with Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love.

On the occasion of the 1976 bicentennial, Indiana lent one of his LOVE sculptures to Philadelphia. It was installed in centrally located John F. Kennedy Plaza near City Hall, where it stayed for two years. In 1978 city representatives decided not to purchase the piece for permanent display, asserting that the estimated $45,000 price was more than the city could afford to spend.
Indiana’s gallery took the sculpture back to New York to hold for a potential buyer. But in those two years Philadelphians had grown attached to the artwork. After public outcry over the sculpture’s disappearance, Fitz Eugene Dixon Jr. (owner of the 76ers basketball team and chair of the city’s Art Commission) purchased the object for $35,000 and donated it to the city. Shortly after the sculpture returned to Philadelphia, Indiana told one reporter, “it is the City of Brotherly Love, [so] Philadelphia should have the biggest and best-est LOVE of all.” Since then it has appeared in countless publicity images, local publications, and tourist photos. Although LOVE was not initially made to represent Philadelphia, and although other versions of the artwork have no affiliation with the city, it became, indisputably, a Philadelphia icon.

**Contested Images**

In the decades surrounding the turn of the twenty-first century, Philadelphians put other old objects to new uses as pictures for the city that challenged Philadelphia’s status as a place past its prime. The three most notable pictures for the city to emerge at the time were the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue. These items became recognizable elements of Philadelphia’s visual culture not long after they were first created, but they acquired a new symbolic status around the year 2000, when proposals to install or move them sparked passionate, often oppositional, public discourse. Two of these objects, *The Gross Clinic* and the Rocky statue, were so bound up in debates about how Philadelphia should present itself to its residents and to the world that they became city icons, the most prominent sort of pictures for the city. As such, they joined the ranks of established city icons like LOVE.

There are, however, some important ways in which the pictures for the city that I focus on in this book are distinct from objects like LOVE. Foremost, the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue all emerged as pictures for the city around a particular historical moment at the turn of the twenty-first century, when Philadelphia’s protracted efforts to manage its image were finally starting to take hold. That context is significant. As Philadelphia was positioning itself more successfully as relevant, vibrant, and welcoming to new residents and visitors, these three historical objects, more than any others, became about Philadelphia and, like the city itself, addressed expanded publics and became newly relevant to contemporary life.

In addition to their shared historical context, the pictures for the city at the center of this book are also linked by the substantial role that public
The public discussions surrounding the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue were the most extensive conversations about visual culture in Philadelphia during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I make this assertion based on the thousands of press clips, letters, and blog posts that I analyzed while working on this book, but I would be remiss to overlook the impact that my personal experiences have had on bringing me to this understanding, as well. I first learned of each of these cases between 2002 and 2007, when I lived in the Philadelphia area. It was difficult to ignore the frequent stories on the radio or the conversations that I overheard on the train that pertained to these emergent pictures for the city. After I began to study this topic formally, I found that when I mentioned my interest in the Rocky statue or the sale of *The Gross Clinic*, people would immediately ask if I had also considered writing about the Barnes collection. Through media outlets like newspapers, radio programs, and websites as well as through the more casual avenue of word of mouth, discourse about these Philadelphia objects spread far beyond the city. Whether I was in California, Vermont, Texas, or Indiana, people I spoke with often identified one or more of these major episodes before I even had the chance to say that they were the specific focus of my work. My informal exchanges reinforced my treatment of these pictures for the city as a three-piece set.

*Contested Image* is structured around three case studies, each dedicated to the story of a different picture for the city. Chapter 1 provides historical context for the three cases by surveying Philadelphia’s changing status and sense of civic pride over the course of the city’s history. The chapters that follow offer a focused analysis of the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue, respectively. Some aspects of each case overlap with strands from the others. Timelines intertwine. Major figures from one chapter make minor appearances elsewhere. The Philadelphia Museum of Art is tied to each object, sometimes as a benefactor and sometimes as a rival. The city’s growing tourism industry, which increased by a third during the period covered in this book, is a common thread throughout each chapter. I reflect on additional—at times uncanny—intersections among these pictures.
for the city in the Conclusion. Taken together, the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue illuminate a constellation of matters that converged to form Philadelphia’s emergent reputation as an internationally relevant center of culture. Individually, each object brings a different moment from Philadelphia’s past into the process of constructing Philadelphia’s twenty-first-century future. Each case also presents a different inflection of how a picture for the city can operate.

The Barnes collection, as a picture for the city, was a vehicle for charting cultural geography and articulating a sense of place in Philadelphia. When Albert Barnes put his peerless art collection in the protection of a foundation in the 1920s, he stipulated that none of the artwork in his galleries could be moved after his death. Citing the need to increase revenue from admission fees, the Barnes Foundation trustees skirted the restriction in 2002 and took formal action toward transporting the meticulously curated collection from its historic home in Merion, Pennsylvania, to a Center City Philadelphia site that would accommodate more visitors. The proposed move set off a venomous dispute between people who wanted to keep the collection in Merion and those who supported reinstalling the art in Philadelphia proper. Both groups argued that their preferred location would give the collection greater significance. Instead of discussing the legality of the move, as many scholars and critics have done, I turn my attention to the public conversations about cultural resources, local identity, accessibility, and tourism that permeated debates about the ethics of relocation. Although the decision to send the Barnes collection to Philadelphia countered the urban exodus that had characterized the city for decades, it revealed, rather than resolved, anxieties about the cultural identities of the suburbs and the city and the roles that each location should play in shaping Philadelphia’s image.

The case of *The Gross Clinic* is a reminder that an object does not become a picture for the city simply because its creator positions it as one. I argue that although Thomas Eakins created *The Gross Clinic* to function, in effect, as a picture for the city, the painting did not truly serve that purpose until the twenty-first century. Philadelphians recognized *The Gross Clinic* as a picture for the city in 2006 after Jefferson Medical College, which had owned the artwork for more than a hundred years, put it up for sale. The school offered Philadelphia institutions forty-five days to purchase the painting for $68 million; otherwise Jefferson would award the masterpiece to an Arkansas-based collector who had already proffered the hefty sum. The Philadelphians and other allies of the arts who rallied to accumulate enough funds to buy the painting justified their effort by claiming *The Gross Clinic* as a keystone of
the city’s cultural patrimony: Philadelphia, they explained, was the painting’s only legitimate home. In that moment, Philadelphians embraced *The Gross Clinic* and the circumstances surrounding its sale to combat their gritty image, assert their identity as a sophisticated region, and step out from the shadow of nearby New York. Moving beyond the matter of identifying Philadelphia on a local level, here individuals and institutions harnessed high culture to elevate Philadelphia’s national status within the broader context of the mid-Atlantic region.\(^{14}\)

In contrast to *The Gross Clinic*, the Rocky statue’s role as a picture for the city reflects the tensions between fine art and popular culture in Philadelphia’s identity. Deciphering the case of the Rocky statue involves considering the way Philadelphia has been represented on screen and how that image reflects, responds to, and influences the city’s appearance in actuality. The bronze sculpture of fictional boxer Rocky Balboa was initially created as a prop for Sylvester Stallone’s 1982 movie, *Rocky III*. After Stallone presented the sculpture as a gift to Philadelphia, local officials, residents, and Stallone himself clashed over whether it belonged on display at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where individuals flocked daily to reenact Rocky’s iconic run up the museum’s steps. Critics who identified the statue as a movie prop, not a work of fine art, argued that it would be more appropriately installed at the city’s sports complex. For more than twenty years, the statue was shuffled around Philadelphia as the filming and premiere of additional *Rocky* movies periodically reignited controversy. When traditional media outlets presented a reduced version of events that pitted everyday *Rocky* fans against elitist art snobs, the statue became lodged at the intersection of class-related conflict in the city and the city’s attempts to navigate its relationship to an imagined cultural heritage.

By 2012, in some way or another, all three of these pictures for the city had been gathered along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. *The Gross Clinic* had been jointly purchased by two arts organizations, and it would split its exhibition time between a gallery just blocks from City Hall and the art museum at the far end of the Parkway. Nearby, the Rocky statue had been installed at the base of that museum’s prominent steps. At the other end of the street, the Barnes Foundation had opened a new facility to display its historic collection.

Positioned on the Parkway, these pictures for the city supported the image of twenty-first-century Philadelphia as a cultural hub. The city’s 2012 tourism report, entitled “The Art of Collaboration,” echoed that sentiment in its name and on its cover, which featured a full-bleed photo of the Parkway.
from the museum’s steps to City Hall (Figure I.3). On the pages inside, the report introduced a new campaign to harness the excitement surrounding the “culturally rich” Parkway and cement Philadelphia’s growing status as “a cultural king.” Philadelphia’s publicists, civic leaders, and philanthropic organizations envisioned transforming the Parkway into a district for cultural
tourism that would provide a geographic counterbalance to the historic Old City district situated to the southeast and anchored by attractions like Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. Their goal echoed that of the idealistic men who first conceived of the Parkway in the late nineteenth century as a symbol of “New Philadelphia.” The diagonal boulevard, lined with cultural and civic buildings in the Beaux-Arts style, was to reflect Philadelphia as a beautiful, modern city in contrast to the rote and rectangular city grid and brick structures that were the legacy of colonial era urban planning and architecture. More than a hundred years later, the presence of the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue along the Parkway would attract visitors to the site and contribute to a vision of Philadelphia that again highlighted the city’s contemporary significance, not just its historic value.

It is difficult to predict whether—or for how long—these objects will continue to function as pictures for the city after Philadelphia and its publics grow accustomed to associating them with their new, shared location. But *Contested Image* is less about predicting Philadelphia’s future than it is about how individuals and organizations attempted to shape that future during a specific historical moment.

**Public Dialogue**

It is widely recognized that dialogue can be an important tool in making and making sense of art. In recent decades a popular wave of artistic practice has focused less on producing tangible or visual objects and more on using creative work to foster meaningful conversations among people who become participants and co-creators rather than passive onlookers. Numerous scholars have also examined how controversial public art projects in particular have created important openings for individuals to examine and debate the values, concerns, or aspirations that exist in their communities. The conversations that arise when groups of people come together to make, view, or fund art can be just as significant as (if not more significant than) the objects that spark those conversations. Even so, dialogue does not transform objects, ideas, or communities simply because it occurs. It is transformative because of how it occurs, who is involved, and the outcomes of those exchanges.

Public dialogue played a powerful role in generating the trio of pictures for the city examined in this book and the place-based identities to which they corresponded. Dialogue, put simply, is the exchange of ideas. Public dialogue, as I approach it here, features two dimensions of publicness. It is a public sharing of ideas about matters of public interest. It can be tempting to think of the
“public” in public dialogue or public space as including “everybody,” but that approach risks overlooking the fact that individuals experience public activities differently and someone is always left out. It is important to remember that the “public sphere,” as some call it, is not a monolithic space. Complex power dynamics involving factors such as race, gender, and class shape the way people speak, listen, and behave in public. At times it can be difficult to determine precisely how identity and circumstances affect what happens in public or why someone is excluded.

Throughout this book I refer to the people involved in public dialogues as “publics,” “communities,” and “Philadelphians.” These words offer ways of describing sets of people by identifying factors that they have in common, even if there is no inherent likeness among the individuals in a particular grouping. While these terms can be interchangeable, they also have unique meanings.

Publics are groups of people, some of whom are strangers, who are, in the words of theorist Michael Warner, “organized by nothing other than . . . the discourse that addresses them.” Publics emerge in relation to a particular text, such as a printed document, an image, spoken words, or even the social fabric of a city. Environmental factors, relationships, and individuals’ traits can further determine how those publics take shape. Thinking about publics in this way recognizes that discourse can create a sense of belonging or not belonging, and that people can belong in different ways. Considering publics in the plural, and defining them as I do, allows for the diverse set of experiences and perspectives that people can have in response to a text, and it underscores the role of the text as a catalyst for determining these groupings. The Barnes collection, The Gross Clinic, and the Rocky statue, as well as the discourse that surrounded them, were key texts around which the publics I discuss in this book formed.

Potentially more intimate than a public, a community may be best understood as a group of people who are connected by shared conditions. Communities can comprise people who live in the same neighborhood, work in similar professions, are fans of the same sports team, or hold similar political beliefs. These groupings are neither fixed nor, necessarily, mutually exclusive. People can move into or out of communities as activities, beliefs, or other factors change. People often belong to multiple communities at the same time. A large community like the citywide community of Philadelphians encompasses an assortment of smaller ones, like the Philadelphia Museum of Art staff, or the residents of the gentrifying area of Kensington. It also intersects—but does not completely overlap—with other communities, like the journalists who covered the public controversies for local, national, or
international media outlets. Rather than focusing exclusively on the sentiments that individuals expressed in the conversations that I study, I think about the way voices converged and diverged as they represented different communities in the city.

“Philadelphians” is the term I use to describe the broad group of individuals who lived in, worked in, or otherwise identified themselves with the city. Philadelphia is a large urban center with a diverse population, and I recognize that not all Philadelphians took the same position in the debates that I discuss. Thanks to the city’s diversity and the wide-reaching nature of the conversations at the core of this book, the case studies in *Contested Image* reflect a range of perspectives, including voices from the city’s sizeable and heterogeneous black population, white working-class residents, and advocates for people living homeless. Even so, people’s opinions about the objects under discussion did not necessarily fall along lines determined by race, gender, or even class. This may be partly due to the fact that many Philadelphians, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, were left out of the discussions altogether. The perspectives that I analyze are limited to those of people who had access to platforms for sharing their ideas. Some were already in positions of power, leading major cultural organizations or corresponding with those leaders. Others maintained their own blogs, commented on websites, displayed signs on their lawns, or spoke with reporters seeking quotes. The decisions of editors, archivists, and individuals who self-censored further shaped the content and the extent of the discourse available for study. At times I question why certain voices were omitted from the ostensibly citywide conversations, but my exploration of this theme is far from comprehensive. In each chapter I focus mainly on examining the dominant conversations that occurred surrounding these emergent pictures for the city because, in the end, this project is about the city’s public image, and the ideas that received the most attention ultimately had the largest impact on how the city appeared in the press and in actuality. I would be thrilled if this book launched further study of the perspectives that were underrepresented in these important public conversations.

I chart the scope of public discourse by analyzing substantial written materials, including press coverage, letters, and blog posts. I also examine visual and verbal elements from sources such as films, promotional materials, and the treatment of urban space. Press releases and archived correspondence among cultural leaders demonstrate how those directly responsible for making decisions about the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue approached their tasks. Unsolicited letters to newspaper editors or arts admin-
Administrators, as well as user-generated website content, indicate how individuals outside of the decision-making process felt about the emergent pictures for the city. Many of the dialogues I consider here occurred just before social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter became popular, but it was not uncommon for people to publish their thoughts outside of formal media outlets by writing blogs and leaving comments on websites. Created by people with specialized knowledge of arts management and the objects in question as well as by those whose expertise lay elsewhere, my sources represent an array of the voices from these heated public conversations. They include offhand remarks and carefully crafted statements. My analyses evaluate the arguments, accuracy, and word choice in these public dialogues. By getting into the weeds, I chart the structure of the forest.

**Becoming Public, Becoming Contemporary**

Through a combination of impassioned public dialogue and physical relocation, the objects at the core of this book became public, developed new contemporary significance, and became more deeply tied to Philadelphia around the turn of the twenty-first century.

While a private art collection or a painting in a museum might not fit the typical model of what constitutes public art, by the time the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue emerged as pictures for the city they had also become public entities. This process has its roots in changing understandings of what public art is and how it operates. Traditionally, public art has been glossed as art that appears in public places—out on the street, as opposed to inside the home or the museum. In the United States, for example, late nineteenth-century memorials erected in public squares honored individuals who died in the Civil War. During the New Deal, artists installed murals celebrating the local flowering of the American spirit in municipal buildings like post offices and libraries. In the 1960s and 1970s, sculptors working in the language of minimalism and pop art extended the space of the gallery onto the street when they installed large-scale metal sculpture in parks and in plazas. In all of these cases the physical object and its location were among the primary features of the public artwork. More recently, however, artists, scholars, and forward-thinking administrators have pushed for an expanded understanding of public art that places even stronger emphasis on the role that the public plays in making or making sense of the artwork. In contrast to publicness pertaining to the object’s location, publicness came to refer to who is involved in creating or interpreting the work.
In describing the objects in this study as public works, I follow the lead of scholars, artists, and administrators who transitioned from defining “public” as a quality of the exhibition environment to “public” as a way of identifying the individuals who are affected by the work. When describing the power of public art, art historian Patricia C. Phillips explains that “public art can convene a constituency to engage in collective exploration—even difficult interrogation—of public ideas, individual requirements, and communitarian values.”

She later expands this definition to include a more abstract notion—that art is public when “it is a manifestation of art activities and strategies that take the idea of public as the genesis and subject for analysis. It is public because of the kinds of questions it chooses to ask or address.”

This approach to public art downplays concrete factors like who made it and where it is displayed and emphasizes instead the more conceptual qualities of the work. It suggests to me that artworks can pass into or out of the category of public art as they become more useful or less useful tools for inviting audiences to examine the nature of public issues and publicness. The objects at the center of this study became public art when they catalyzed the large debates that allowed Philadelphians to negotiate how they wanted their city to be known.

Recognizing the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic,* and the Rocky statue as historical objects that shaped Philadelphia’s identity around the year 2000 requires recognizing them as not only public works but also contemporary public works. Some readers may find it odd that I identify a collection assembled before 1951, a painting made in 1875, and a sculpture from 1980 as contemporary. But as pictures for the city, uniquely relevant to Philadelphia’s identity at the turn of the twenty-first century, they are contemporary, both to each other and to the current moment. When introducing his book on the history of studying contemporary art, Richard Meyer reminded readers, “We need to recognize that all historical art was once current and that all contemporary art will soon be historical. We also need to grapple with how the art of the past informs and reconfigures the contemporary moment.”

That grappling is precisely what this book does. As I analyze the dialogues that transformed the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic,* and the Rocky statue into pictures for the city, I chart the processes that harnessed elements of the objects’ histories in ways that made those items newly relevant to audiences at the turn of the twenty-first century. Rather than lingering on the moment when these objects were made, I ask how their significance changed over time as I examine the ways Philadelphians injected meaning about place-based identity into these works years after their creation. This
approach underscores how objects and the collections that contain them can function as ever-contemporary, not just as items that teach about the past.25

As the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue acquired their new public and contemporary significance, they became more deeply tied to Philadelphia. Put differently, they became site-specific works. As pictures for the city these three objects derived their meaning from being physically located in Philadelphia, and they shaped the meaning of that place in return. Each object came under particular public scrutiny because of tensions about exactly where (or if) it belonged in the city.26 Heated public exchanges explored how these objects interacted with the precise settings of a neighborhood, a gallery, or a nearby landmark. More abstractly, as each picture for the city became intertwined with the conversations that shaped its new meaning, it became specific to the site of that discourse, as well. Art historian Miwon Kwon has shown that the site of an artwork need not be limited to a geographic location. Site can be an institution, a network of ideas, or a conversation.27 Echoing her argument that art is embedded in some sites that cannot be charted on a map, I approach the public exchanges that I study here as vital sites for the objects they concerned. The objects in this study function symbiotically with tangible and intangible sites simultaneously. Philadelphians accessed the less concrete sites of historical context, community, and political concerns through physical location. The deep connection between these objects and Philadelphia's identity relies on their achieving a degree of specificity both to their sites in Philadelphia and to the sites of the conversations people had about them in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

**Joining the Discussion**

I recognize that in writing about these public conversations in particular and Philadelphia's reputation more generally I am writing about objects, events, and issues that were—and likely still are—deeply meaningful to many people on a personal level. Rather than attempting to speak over these voices, I view this book as a way of joining the discussion. This project started from a place of wanting to better understand—and wanting to help other stakeholders better understand—the questions and answers that were circulating about the appropriate locations for the Barnes collection, *The Gross Clinic*, and the Rocky statue. While I do aim to correct the record on some misreported or misremembered facts, my goal is not to have the last word on these important topics. Instead, this book is about simultaneously expanding and
refoocusing the conversation. Even though countless individuals followed or participated in the public exchanges about moving the emergent pictures for the city, few stepped back to consider the underlying issues at stake in each dispute. With this project I invite those who contributed to these discussions to question how their rhetoric and lines of argument corresponded to broader issues about Philadelphia’s identity.

My desire to speak with rather than for the diverse stakeholders who make up the audience for this book reflects the goals of growing numbers of researchers who frame their work as public scholarship. The richest forms of public scholarship typically involve trusted collaboration between academic researchers and partners outside the university who work together for outcomes that benefit all involved parties. The products of public scholarship make meaningful contributions to academic discourse and to the lives of community partners. This book represents a hybrid practice. Following the model of much traditional scholarship, I have not collaborated directly with specific community partners. But, in the spirit of public scholarship, my research questions emerged from conversations taking place outside of academic circles, and I do my best to honor the perspectives of people outside of academia who contributed to those conversations.

I am particularly invested in the way that academic work, especially in the humanities, can be pertinent to the world outside of the university. It is for this reason, in part, that I have chosen to study big debates that engaged broad publics. This book is not only for scholars and students but also for civic leaders, arts administrators, and people who want to better understand how images and public discourse shape the identity of a place. The chapters that follow examine how images become contested, how meaning changes, and how public dialogue contributes to a city’s reputation. By deciphering the wide-reaching conversations surrounding the Barnes collection, The Gross Clinic, and the Rocky statue, I demonstrate how three historical objects became potent images for Philadelphia’s future.