



PUBLIC ART IN CONTEXT

WHAT ARE THE ORIGINS OF PUBLIC ART?

Contemporary public art has its origins in a number of different artistic, political and cultural contexts. These include:

- The ancient and ongoing practice of using works of art in public places to commemorate people and events, to celebrate the powerful and influential, and to perform the aesthetic function of enhancing architecture and public spaces
- The concept, promoted particularly since the [Victorian era](#), that providing free public access to arts and culture is beneficial to the population and contributes to social improvement
- During the Great Depression in the United States, the practice of allocating a portion of the budget for public works projects to [commission artworks](#) was implemented as a means of ensuring that artists and other workers were supported with employment opportunities - the origin of contemporary Percent for Art schemes
- Some contemporary art in public space has its origins in the performing arts and street theatre, rather than the more static arts of painting and sculpture, resulting in dynamic and ephemeral works, e.g. [The Giants by Royal Deluxe at the 2015 Perth Festival](#)
- Some other forms of public art have their origins in grass-roots community initiatives, counter-cultural and even illegal practices – murals and street art for example.



KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ART

In the last 50 years there have been a number of social, cultural and technological developments that have influenced the practice of commissioning and creating public art:

- Public monuments and memorials have become culturally and politically problematic as official histories are interrogated and the actions of cultural and political figures are re-evaluated – particularly as first-nations’ perspectives are acknowledged, e.g. the [Maitland Brown Memorial](#). Contemporary memorials are more likely to commemorate victims and tragedies, than heroes and victories e.g. the [Bali Bombing of 2002](#) and may also take portable or non-permanent forms, eg the [AIDS Memorial Quilt](#)
- The relationship of a work of public art to its surroundings has evolved, ranging from works being [displayed in public spaces](#), works that are designed to be an [integral part of the design of public spaces](#), and works that are [intended to address social issues](#) and engage directly with community as a form of activism
- Government provision of public art is still considered to be a key means of delivering financial support and opportunity to artists, and to encourage local professional development and cultural achievement. Public art is also considered to contribute directly to the delivery of a range of other benefits, including:
 - [Community health and well-being](#)
 - [Place-making and heritage interpretation](#)
 - [Place-activation and economic development](#)
 - [Cultural tourism](#)
 - [Combatting criminal and antisocial behaviours such as graffiti.](#)
- The emergence of new materials and technologies and developments within artistic practices have profoundly changed expectations about what a work of public art can be, where it can be placed, how long it should last, and how people should experience and engage with it.