

Not every city [the] size [of Jackson] has such fine examples of twentieth-century American art on permanent public display. Most of Jackson's sculptures rank in the upper echelon of the 900 sculptures inventoried in Michigan in the early 1990s as part of SOS! [(Save our Sculpture!).

Michael Panhorst, art historian and author^{1}

Outdoor Sculpture in Jackson

Jackson County is lucky to host a number of major outdoor sculptures: from Loreda Taft's "Defense of the Flag" (1904), located in Downtown Jackson's Withington Park, to Richard Hunt's "Victory of Reconstruction" (1995), located in front of Jackson College's Potter Center. Most of the sculptures are traditional in nature. However, many of the more recent sculptures are abstract. These nonrepresentational pieces of art can be described as assemblages "of found objects or custom-fabricated shapes into constructions that often bare little or no resemblance to recognizable objects."^{2}



"MLive" website^{11}

Description and Cost of the "Summer Night Tree"

The "Summer Night Tree," a 10-ton 30-foot high corten steel structure (painted black) is Jackson's most iconic piece of abstract sculpture.^{3} It has been described academically as a "welded steel assemblage of geometric and biomorphic forms;"^{2} artistically as "a tall abstract sculpture with large flat twisting, leaf-like forms rising from a narrow trunklike cluster;"^{4} and more colorfully as the "Exploding Chicken" by a Jackson County resident. It has been controversial since its unveiling with some people believing it to be 'beautiful' and others considering it to be an 'ugly piece of black metal.'^{3} The price of the sculpture was \$152,000 in 1978, an amount equal to \$545,235 in 2013.^{{3},{5}} It was paid for through a \$50,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and \$102,000 in private contributions from businesses, foundations, and individuals.^{3} It was most recently appraised at \$2 million in the Year 2000.^{6}

Louise Nevelson - the Artist

The "Summer Night Tree" was designed by Louise Nevelson, a well known abstract sculptor in the later half of the 20th Century. She created many large sculptures by assembling found objects in boxed modular arrangements (i.e., stacked crates) typically unified by monochromatic paint.^{2} Criticism of her work has ranged from 'cold, airless, and stark' to 'graceful, warm, haunting, and uplifting.'^{3} She liked Jackson as the location for one of her sculptures due to its proximity to Michigan State University (MSU), the University of Michigan (U of M), and other colleges.^{7}

History of the "Summer Night Tree"

Upon the award of her commission, Ms. Nevelson visited the site for the sculpture --an urban plaza in front of the former hotel located in "Jackson Square"-- to develop her concept.^{{2},{3}} The hotel served as the background (i.e., "stacked crates") which are reminiscent of much of her work.^{7} It took her a year to design the sculpture in her New York City studio and to have it fabricated at Lippincott, Inc. in North Haven, Connecticut.^{2}

The "Summer Night Tree" was dedicated on May 24, 1978 and repainted by a local firm in 1993.^{2} It was removed and stored due to construction in 1998, most likely when the plaza in front of the hotel was converted into a parking lot.^{6} The sculpture was re-installed nearby at its current location at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Francis Street in 2001.^{11} Unfortunately, the sculpture was hit by a single car in November of 2010.^{6} Finally, the hotel --which provided the backdrop for the sculpture-- was recently demolished.^{8}

Some civic boosters have called for a new location for the sculpture because of the traffic accident, changes in the surroundings of the "Summer Night Tree," and (most likely) other reasons.^{{6},{7}} Possible sites include Bucky Harris Park, located at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Jackson Street; the Ella Sharp Museum of Art and History campus; and the site of the old ACME Building, located at the corner of Ganson and Mechanic Streets.^{7} Each proposal has its issues, causing no action to be taken due to lack of support (i.e., civic, political, and financial).

The Need for Restoration

Restoration needs to move forward despite the ongoing relocation issue in order to conserve the "Summer Night Tree." Rust and other surface damage that has accumulated since it was last painted must be repaired as well as any damage caused by the traffic crash. The Arts & Cultural Alliance of Jackson County recognizes the need for the restoration of the sculpture and will help facilitate the raising of the needed funding and public support for the sculpture. Reasons for supporting the conservation of the "Summer Night Tree" include:"

- **Economic Development (i.e., 'the Numbers')**

For example, data gathered by Creative State Michigan reveals that "for every \$1 invested in arts and culture [in 2009], \$51 [was] pumped back into the state's economy.

Its data also shows that \$2 billion --16% of all tourism-related revenues in 2011-- were attributed to arts & culture; more than golf, boating & sailing, hunting & fishing, and hiking & biking combined.^{9}

- **Community-Building (i.e., Civic Pride)**

You can admire its quality or not but you have to acknowledge that Jackson has one undisputed piece of world-class art by a world-class artist.

Jackson Citizen Patriot editorial^{10}

Loved or reviled, "Summer Night Tree is a financially valuable civic asset that stands 30 feet tall.

Brad Flory, local journalist^{11}

Great art stirs strong feelings

Unknown local art patron^{11}

Based on that criteria, "Summer Night Tree" is a great success and deserves to be preserved.

End Notes

{1} "Heritage Preservation" website: www.heritagepreservation.org/news/Jackson.htm

{2} "Ella Sharp Museum of Art and History" website: www.ellasharp.org/our-outdoor-sculpture.html

{3} "Nevelson Lives Forever in Jackson" Ella Sharp Museum of Art and History newsletter (date unknown)

{4} Smithsonian American Art Museum website <http://siris-artinventories.si.edu>

{5} "Bureau of Labor Statistics" website: www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

{6} "MLive" website: www.mlive.com/news/jackson/index.ssf/2009/11/car_hits_summer_night_tree_scu.html

{7} "MLive" website: www.mlive.com/news/jackson/index.ssf/2010/08/summer_night_tree_sculpture_lo.html

{8} "MLive" website: www.mlive.com/news/jackson/index.ssf/2012/10/for_sale_riverwalk_hotel_plaza.html

{9} "Creative State Michigan" website: <http://creativestatemi.artservemichigan.org>

{10} "MLive" website: www.mlive.com/opinion/jackson/index.ssf/2011/07/editorial_move_artwork_but_let.html

{11} "MLive" website: http://blog.mlive.com/bradosphere/2011/08/brad_flory_column_summer_night.html