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'I Am Queen Mary' Receives Permanent Permission in Copenhagen, Denmark, Going From Artwork to Landmark

Art / **Published On March 31, 2021 07:42 AM /**

Staff Consortium **March 31, 2021**

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Jeannette Ehlers (left) and La Vaughn Belle (right). Said Belle, "I Am Queen Mary centers the narratives of the courageous human beings who fought for their dignity and their survival under the harshest of living and working conditions." By. LARS EGELUND.

A monumental work of art in bronze and coral stone will tower for generations to come at the entrance to the harbor in Copenhagen in recognition of a controversial era of Danish history, a release issued Tuesday has made known.

In a historic decision the Danish government granted the two artists La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers permanent permission to keep their groundbreaking public artwork I Am Queen

Mary in front of the West Indian Warehouse. This artist-led initiative was inaugurated in March 2018 to worldwide attention as the first collaborative monument to a Black woman in Scandinavia. Continuing the journey from a temporary artwork to a permanent monument, this May the artists will launch a crowdfunding campaign to finance a final version in Copenhagen and St. Croix, US Virgin Islands.

According to the release, I Am Queen Mary emphasizes that art can be a key tool for creating a space for necessary dialogue around difficult histories. Denmark held colonies in the Caribbean for close to 250 years and was the 7th largest slave trading nation, gaining substantial wealth from this endeavor. The two-story monument references the historical figure Mary Thomas, a sugarcane field worker who along with others led the largest labor revolt in Danish colonial history. This insurrection, also known as the 'Fireburn', occurred on St. Croix in 1878 in the former Danish West Indies, currently the US Virgin Islands.

I Am Queen Mary fuses a digital hybrid of the two artists as a bridge across the Atlantic, merging their bodies, nations and narratives, stated the release. The figure sits above a sculpture of coral stones carved from the ocean by enslaved Africans on St. Croix and were used as foundations for colonial era buildings. Additionally, the work contains contemporary references to Black resistance and freedom struggles.

Additionally, I Am Queen Mary commemorates the histories of resistance to slavery and colonialism. The permanent permission not only secures the monument's permanence in Copenhagen, but also the previously marginalized histories of women and people of color.

I Am Queen Mary will be a strong and lasting physical memory of a dark side of Danish history, which we must not forget - and a concrete reminder in Copenhagen's cityscape that Denmark's history is created by many incredibly different people, not just by kings and war heroes," said Denmark Minister of Culture Joy Mogensen.

A \$1.5 million fundraising campaign begins

In April 2019 the Finance Committee of the Danish Parliament granted \$160,000 to the I Am Queen Mary project pending two conditions: that the artists were able to secure the permanent permission and that they raise the rest of the money to complete the project.

According to the release, since then, the temporary version of the artwork was damaged multiple times and in December 2020 the figure made of polystyrene was taken down after irreparable damage was caused by a winter storm. The rest of the funds must now be raised for the bronze casting upon an appropriately reinforced plinth in both Copenhagen and St. Croix. Initial conversations with Danish foundation have been positive and the artists are confident and hopeful as they prepare to fundraise in the coming months.

In May the crowdsource funding campaign will begin and all who are interested in supporting this project are encouraged to sign-up on the website and follow the hashtag #supportiamqueenmary. More information can be found on the official website: www.iamqueenmary.com.

