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SWING LOW: HARRIET TUBMAN MEMORIAL SCULPTURE IS DEDICATED IN HARLEM

Work by Renowned Artist Alison Saar Commissioned by Percent for Art

Parks & Recreation Commissioner Adrian Benepe today joined Department of Cultural Affairs Commissioner Kate D. Levin, Department of Transportation Commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan, Department of Design and Construction Commissioner David J. Burney, former Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, Congressman Charles Rangel, and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Curator Christopher Moore to dedicate a memorial sculpture of Harriet Tubman in Harlem. The memorial, commissioned through the Department of Cultural Affairs' Percent for Art program, was created by the renowned sculptor Alison Saar.

The \$2.8 million, multi-agency project, which included the landscaping of a formerly barren traffic triangle, was championed by former Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields. Designed by Quennell Rothschild and Partners and constructed by URS, the renovated triangle features paving blocks and roughly hewn granite to create a natural setting. Plantings native to both New York and Tubman's home state of Maryland represent the woods and terrain traveled by Tubman and her Underground Railroad passengers, providing a contemplative space in which to consider Tubman's legacy.

“Alison Saar’s *Swing Low*, a memorial to Harriet Tubman, is a wonderful addition to the City’s collection of public monuments in the ‘Harlem Gateway’ area, from 110th to 125th Streets,” said Parks & Recreation Commissioner Adrian Benepe. “Thanks to our partners at the Department of Cultural Affairs, Department of Design and Construction, the Department of Transportation, and a generous funding allocation from former Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields, what was once a deserted traffic triangle is now a destination spot for residents and visitors alike. This sculpture is not only a memorial to an historic figure; it is a compelling work of art and source of historical knowledge and inspiration for all who pass by.”

“Swing Low is an important commemoration of Harriet Tubman’s fight against slavery, and is fast becoming an icon for the community,” said Cultural Affairs Commissioner Kate D. Levin. “The Percent for Art program integrates artists into design planning for City spaces, and Alison Saar’s extraordinary sculpture on this site proves what is possible when contemporary art and smart civic architecture come together.”

“The collective efforts of our design and construction teams, with Quennell Rothschild’s sensitive landscape design and Alison Saar’s professionalism and talent, have resulted in a beautiful and moving new monument for Harlem,” said Design and Construction Commissioner David J. Burney, FAIA. “We are proud of our role in transforming this triangle of land into a place for reflection and pride.”

“As former Manhattan Borough President, I am proud to have lead the initiative in championing this important piece of art by Alison Saar, and am grateful to the Departments of Parks, Cultural Affairs, and Design and Construction for working together to make this day possible,” said C. Virginia Fields. “Harriet Tubman is one of this nation’s greatest icons, and *Swing Low* will serve as an inspiration to all who share Harriet Tubman’s vision of justice and equality.”

“I chose to depict Harriet Tubman not so much as a conductor of the Underground Railroad, but as a train itself, an unstoppable locomotive that worked towards improving the lives of slaves for most of her long life,” said artist Alison Saar. “I wanted not merely to speak of her courage or illustrate her commitment, but to honor her compassion. And in this monument I hope that the spirit of Harriet Tubman will inspire compassion in all of us here and for generations to come.”

The larger-than-life bronze sculpture stands at the crossroads of St. Nicholas Avenue, West 122nd Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard in Harlem. Douglass once said of Tubman that except for John Brown, he knew of “no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people.” In the sculpture, Saar designed stylized portraits of “anonymous passengers” of the Underground Railroad in Tubman's skirt, some of which were inspired by West African “passport masks.” Around the granite base of the monument are bronze tiles alternately depicting events in Tubman's life and traditional quilting patterns.

Born into slavery in Maryland in 1822, Tubman escaped in 1849 via the Underground Railroad, the network of places and people dedicated to helping slaves find their way to freedom in non-slaveholding communities. Settling first in Philadelphia, then Canada, Tubman spent ten years returning to Maryland at great personal risk, to guide scores of friends and family to freedom. Determined to end slavery, she later served the Union Army as a scout, spy and nurse in the Civil War. Settling in Auburn, New York after the war, she continued campaigning for equal rights for women and African Americans. Her humanitarian work, including caring for the sick, homeless and disabled of all races, resulted in the establishment of the Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged in that community. She died in 1913 and was buried in Fort Hill Cemetery in Auburn with semi-military honors.

The sculpture and redesign of the triangle received a prestigious Public Design Commission Award for Excellence in Design in 2004. Carver Savings Bank has provided a lead gift towards establishing an endowment for the sculpture’s future maintenance.