

**The Social Impact of Public Art:
Ann Weaver Norton's *Gateway to Knowledge*, 1980,
Brattle Square, Cambridge, MA**

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The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the current mental health crisis in the United States, spurring research on ways to reduce increased stress, anxiety, and loneliness, among all ages. Scientific research available in two recent best sellers, [*Elissa Epel's The Stress Prescription*](#) (Penguin Random House, 2022) and Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross, [*Your Brain on Art*](#) (Penguin Random House, 2023), demonstrates that even spending short amounts of time each day contemplating art in nature have many positive benefits for our well-being. Yet, for many sectors of the population who are intimidated by the thought of entering a public art museum or gallery, public art can offer a viable solution. Yet, how often do we stop to consider the role of public art in our everyday lives? What can we learn from past policies that created it, and how can we assess its social impact over time? Ann Weaver Norton's monumental *Gateway to Knowledge* erected in Brattle Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts offers a worthy case for our consideration. Commissioned in 1978, the sculpture came into being when public policy allocated one-half percent of the cost for constructing Boston's MBTA Red Line Extension, a total of \$680,000 in 1978 for [*Arts on the Line*](#).

In the late 1930s, artist Louise Nevelson was talking with some men about sculpture. One of them warned her, "Louise, you've got to have balls to be a sculptor." Nevelson responded, "I do have balls," later adding in her memoir, [*Dawns & Dusks*](#)

(Scribner's, 1980, as quoted in [Hyperallergic](#)), "But it hurt inside." While Louise Nevelson (1899-1988) may be a familiar name, [Ann Weaver Norton](#) (1905-1982) and her monumental sculpture, *Gateway to Knowledge* (1980)--completed posthumously for the Harvard Square Station in Cambridge, Massachusetts--is probably not, even if you have walked by it as many times as I have.

In 1942, following her early years in New York City, Ann Weaver began teaching at the newly-opened Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida. After studying at the [Art Students League](#) and [Cooper Union](#) and despite showing her work in prestigious exhibitions, she struggled to make ends meet as a sculptor. Weaver relocated to Florida to secure a steady income. Ralph Norton, founder of the Norton Museum of Art, was drawn to Weaver's quiet intensity about her sculpture and became intrigued by her passionate views on contemporary art. Along with her own sculptures, many of the artists whose work she admired entered the Norton Museum collection. (Ellen Roberts, *Norton and His Museum*, 2019, p. 96). In 1948, Ralph Norton, although thirty years Weaver's senior, surprised her with a marriage proposal, which she eventually accepted.

Ralph Norton fulfilled his promise to build a studio, created to Ann's specifications so she could continue sculpting. At the time, she described their West Palm Beach residence as a "beautiful, old broken-down house," but was thrilled by the surrounding landscape. She noted, "I took those woods to do my work in." (Both quotations from Eiland, *Ann Weaver Norton. Sculptor*, 2000, p. 53) As urban development encroached on the landscape, she began planting tropical palms, native plants, and bushes to attract birds and insects, a practice now common for sustaining pollinators. Following her husband's death in 1953, Ann Weaver Norton she

began initial concepts for surrounding her sculptures with nature. Between 1968 and 1981, a year before she died, she completed much of the final work for what is now the Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens. (Eiland, *Ann Weaver Norton Sculptor*, 2000, p. 70).

Given the daunting cost of materials and execution, the path of sculptors in the United States was fraught with challenges, regardless of gender. For women artists of her generation, sculpture was considered the purview of men. (Caroline Seebohm, [Monumental Dreams](#), 2014, p. 73.) Despite the support of her husband's generous resources which allowed her to give up teaching to support herself, Ann Weaver Norton's faced considerable discrimination based on gender when it came to public commissions.

Among American sculptors, Ann Weaver Norton belonged to a small group of mid-century artists, including her teacher, William Zorach, who were known as [direct carvers](#), a term describing those who chisel directly into their chosen materials. Norton typically worked on stone, cedar, granite, marble, or brick, the material she used for her gateways, preferring the softer, handmade Mexican brick for those installed in the Ann Norton Sculpture Gardens. Norton described her vision for large brick works like that she created for Brattle Square. What for years had inspired her were, "...the great rock formations of the Southwest and by the Navajo and the Hopi Indians who live near them." (Ann Weaver Norton, Notes for *Gateway to Knowledge*, Transcript, ANSG Archives, consulted February 2024). She also may have been inspired by the brick chimneys that stood among the surviving ruins of houses from her youth in Alabama and the South. (Eiland, *Ann Weaver Norton, Sculptor*, 2000, p. 71).

In 1978, at the age of 73, Norton secured her first public commission during the expansion of Boston's [Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority](#) (MBTA), the oldest subway

system in the nation. Four stations in the Red Line Northwest Extension—Harvard Square, where Norton’s *Gateway to Knowledge* is located, along with Porter Square, Davis Square, and Alewife, incorporated public art into their new construction. From a modest research and development grant, the project came to fruition as a larger program called Arts on the Line, completed in March of 1985 with the opening of the Alewife Station. The timing for Arts on the Line was good, coinciding with “a growing eagerness to see the arts more fully integrated into our everyday lives.” (Pamela Worden, in Kline and Sidlauskas, [*Arts on the Line. Art for Public Transit Spaces*, Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1980](#), p. 3).

Arts on the Line served as a pilot for a national program spearheaded by [Mrs. Joan Mondale](#) and Secretary of Transportation, [Brock Adams](#), who sought to develop guidelines for incorporating design, art and architecture into transportation facilities across the U.S. (Pamela Worden, in Kline and Sidlauskas, *Arts on the Line. Art for Public Transit Spaces*, Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1980, p. 3). With the support of the National Endowment for the Arts, funds available for commissioned artworks grew to \$695,000 ([Red Line Northwest Extension Brochure](#), p. 3.) Eventually, the guidelines and procedures developed by Arts on the Line inspired similar national programs in New York, Buffalo, Atlanta, Miami, Los Angeles, and Portland ([Red Line Northwest Extension Brochure](#), p. 3.)

In 1978, the selection process for Arts on the Line was considered a model of community engagement. For Harvard Square, the panel included Carl Belz, Director of the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis, Perry Rathbone, former Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, and Virginia Gunter, sculptor and curator. Those professionals were joined by an Advisory Group representing Cambridge Community Development, Cambridge Historical Commission, as well as

the business and resident communities (Kline and Sidlauskas, *Arts on the Line*, Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1980.) Three women served on the seven-member committee: two as advisors representing the Cambridge community, and one as the sole artist on the panel. From over 400 entries in a range of media submitted for all four stations, Norton's *Gateway to Knowledge* became one of the four chosen for Harvard Square and among the twenty-one works selected for Arts on the Line.

Today the process of selection public sculpture has evolved in ways that have far greater positive outcomes for social impact, as witnessed during the recent selection of [Hank Willis Thomas' *The Embrace* \(1923\)](#) on Boston Common. In a recent interview for the *Social Impact Review*, Imari Paris Jeffries, Executive Director of The King Center, now [Embrace Boston](#), and The Embrace Center, Roxbury, described the role of his organization as the "[notetaker](#)" and coordinator among many different Boston communities. Unlike Arts on the Line, The King Center and The Embrace Ideas Festival magnify the community impact of Thomas' sculpture with access to far greater resources and infrastructure. As Jeffries observes, he coordinates multi-pronged efforts to engage the Boston communities through public policy, research, and grass roots organizing, while [The Embrace Ideas Festival](#) nurtures a humanities, arts, and culture approach. Thomas' [The Embrace](#) was made widely available to the public the year before it was cast, with digital images of the sculpture accessible to the public online. After it was unveiled on Boston Common on January 16, 2023 amidst an array of dignitaries and community leaders, public response was mixed, with many expressing [shock and dismay at the headless memorial](#) to Dr. Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King.

Arts on the Line did well by choosing the work of a woman sculptor whose selection for the Arts on the Line commission was highly significant for her. In handwritten notes about her creative process for submitting *Gateway to Knowledge* to the Arts on the Line program, Norton wrote that she produced, "...several designs including a horizontal one." She further observed, "These were carefully considered but finally the simplified upright design which I submitted to the committee stood forth as the most suitable and beautiful one." (ANSG Archives, *Gateway to Knowledge* Folder, Ann Weaver Norton, *Notes for Gateway to Knowledge*, Transcript, and "Brattle Square Monument," Consulted February 2024).

Notable among the other artists represented in the exhibition of Arts on the Line was [Sam Gilliam](#) (b. 1933), who received his second permanent public installation, despite being the first artist of color to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in 1972. (Kline and Sidlauskas, *Arts on the Line*, Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1980, pp. 34-35.) For Arts on the Line, Gilliam, received recognition for his first metal sculpture, a dramatic departure from his painted canvas wall pieces now represented in [over fifty public collections](#).

For the 1980 MIT exhibition of all the twenty-one works selected for Arts on the Line, Norton sent her plaster model, 20.5 inches high at a scale of one inch to a foot, representing her proposal for a monumental brick piece over twenty feet tall and five feet wide (Kline and Sidlauskas, *Arts on the Line*, Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1980, p. 14). Completed after Norton's death in 1983, *Gateway to Knowledge* comprises two pillars, representing education and knowledge, joined at the top and separated by a six-inch slot. Executed in yellow bricks weighing 46,000 pounds, the cost of installing the piece was \$35,000. (Figures from ANSG Archives, *Gateway to Knowledge* Folder, Catalogue Worksheet, Arts on the Line Project, Consulted February 2024),

just over a quarter (28%) of the amount allocated to the most expensive work commissioned during the course of the project. This inequity for creating Norton's work could be avoided if state and national expenditures for public sculptures became available to the public via an accessible dashboard or database. This approach could build upon similar research begun for the [National Monument Audit](#), produced by the [Monument Lab](#) and funded by the Andrew W. Mellon and other foundations, that have already altered the dialogue about public monuments in the United States.

Norton's statement published in the 1980 MIT exhibition catalogue for *Arts on the Line* offers further insights into her artistic vision and choice of material. She wrote: "My sculptures are sort of gateways and sort of monuments, and then they sort of remind me of *chortens*—things along the road in Nepal, things you put up to the gods. Wanting to make very large sculptures, I chose brick, first because of the beautiful soft color of hand-made brick. Second, it harmonizes so well with nature, being really of the earth itself. Third, it is a material which can be shaped for sculpture." And, perhaps knowing first-hand the cost of realizing her enormous works, she further says of brick, "Today among the great materials it is the most economical to use and it weathers very well." (Kline and Sidlauskas, *Arts on the Line*, Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1980, p. 14).

The natural and made-made brick surroundings of Cambridge were of utmost importance to Norton. She studied plans and photographs of the Brattle Square site created by [Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill](#), architects of Harvard's Brattle Street Station. Using strategies she had already employed at her Florida home and studio, Norton intended for *Gateway to Knowledge* to be experienced within nature, enhanced by "trees, grass, gravel, paths,

etc. ...planned with the sculpture itself.” (Kline and Sidlauskas, *Arts on the Line*, Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1980, p. 14). Envisioning the effect of her work on those who visited Brattle Square, Norton hoped that *Gateway to Knowledge*, “...might generate a little calm [&] where students would be inspired and contemplation would be called for. That is what I tried for in the upright design I submitted.” (ANSG Archives, Ann Weaver Norton, *Notes for Gateway to Knowledge*, Transcript and originals, Consulted February 2024.) Surrounded by heavy traffic at the intersection of Brattle and Mount Auburn Streets, Norton understood and hoped that her “...work might offer a welcome contrast in tempo.” Ultimately she wrote, “I hope it will give joy to the students & public for many years to come.” (Both quotes from Kline and Sidlauskas, *Arts on the Line*, Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1980, p. 14.) Supported by recent research conducted during the pandemic by Arthur Brooks, the ability for all to experience [art as a regular habit](#) is critical to our well-being. It should play a more prominent role in public policy for urban development in the United States and abroad.

After Norton finished *Gateway to Knowledge*, artists unknown to us today created a trio of imaginary beasts that gather around the base of Norton’s *Gateway to Knowledge*. Their works evoke a sense of joy in their making. Ever frugal to ensure her meager earnings as a teacher supported her sculpture, Norton may have appreciated the artists’ creativity in realizing their vision by sourcing and crafting their sculptures from repurposed, everyday materials found close at hand. At the left, one sculpture fashioned from vinyl records and a basket stands above a plaque with the title black vinyl rhino, while at the right, a grey elephant bearing the name, Michelle the blue elephant, stands on legs covered in blue jeans with cast off boots for hooves and lifts a trunk made from discarded plastic tubing. Between them is a creature

named the “Great Red Heron Dinobird” that resembles a red Native American raven with an open beak fashioned from a wooden folding chair and out-stretched feathered wings made from strips of fabric. As the wings catch the breeze, the creature takes flight, encouraging our minds to soar. The three sculptures suggest protective spirits in animal form. Beneath Norton’s *Gateway to Knowledge* and soaring trees now illuminated at night, they stand watch as passersby of all ages--students, the unhoused, musicians--, pause on Brattle Square, to eat, talk, make music, rest, or daydream.

More than forty years have passed since Norton’s soaring brick sculpture of the *Gateway to Knowledge* first anchored a small island in Harvard Square, the vestige of a project meant to bring art to everyone. As noted by Pamela Worden in the Arts on the Line exhibition catalogue, the program began with a sense that art and design could be incorporated into our daily lives through accessible public spaces. That is true of public art programs that followed, whether as initiatives that began in [1986 in cities like Phoenix, Arizona](#), or by enhanced outdoor spaces at public institutions such as the [sculpture garden and skating rink](#) that opened in 1999 at National Gallery of Art on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Given the rise of the built urban environment, even small parks, known as [“vest,” “pocket,” or “vest pocket” parks](#), created in the United States and around the world, especially those that offer a chance to spend time contemplating art, have the capacity to reduce stress and anxiety while opening our minds. Even small islands at busy intersections like Brattle Square can achieve this, offering greater opportunities for members of the community to forge connections in urban settings for young and old, who increasingly experience [loneliness and isolation](#), as described by [Jeremy Noble and The Project UnLonely](#).

It is just that moment in our daily lives to contemplate nature and art that can encourage us to experience wonder and awe as a means of reducing stress, as described in Elissa Epel's [*The Stress Prescription. 7 Days to More Joy and Ease*](#), (2022, pp. 126-127). Based on recent scientific studies by Epel (*The Stress Prescription*, 2022, pg. 127) and Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross ([*Your Brain on Art. How the Arts Transform Us*](#), 2023, pp. 28-29), art coupled with natural plantings reduce stress while also bringing us greater joy and an openness to new ideas and possibilities.

As a pathway for greater health and mental benefits, Norton's combination of sculpture and nature can create positive social impact by inviting contemplation and enhancing our well-being. And, for the unnamed artists who created the sculptures surrounding *Gateway to Knowledge*, their experience of making art can help reduce stress and improve mental health (Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross, *Your Brain on Art. How the Arts Transform Us*, Random House, 2023, pp. 28-29.) The next time you find yourself in Cambridge, Massachusetts, or any other dense urban setting, try seeking out a small park, ideally one enhanced by art like Brattle Square, where *Gateway to Knowledge* invites you to experience Ann Weaver Norton's legacy.

