AHAA Symposium 2021  
Chairs: Wendy Bellion and Jennifer Van Horn  
Discussants: Dana Byrd, Ellery Foutch, Philippe Halbert, JoAnne Mancini, John Ott  
“Iconoclasm in North America: A Roundtable”

Abstract:

Iconoclasm, a Greek word meaning “image destruction,” has a long and complex history. The past two decades have witnessed a surge of scholarly and curatorial interest in this issue, and contemporary events – from attacks on world heritage sites to the removal of public monuments – have added urgency to conversations about artistic displacement, censorship, and destruction.

Yet to date, iconoclasm has not been a central focus of Americanist scholarship. As authors of recent studies about destruction, we propose an AHAA roundtable to help catalyze historical and historiographical consideration of iconoclasm in North America. The roundtable will consist of five leading art historians collectively representing the chronological, geographical, and cultural diversity of North American art history, from French colonial settlement to New Deal-era murals of African American communities. Following 8-minute presentations by each speaker, the roundtable will open for audience discussion.

Each discussant will draw from recent or forthcoming work while engaging questions such as:

- What compels individuals to destroy works of art?
- How does destruction fundamentally alter place, shape memory, and create new art?
- How may we understand iconoclasm as a discourse on the nature of images and representation?
- Have historical circumstances particular (but not exceptional) to North America – such as democratic republicanism, settler colonialism, imperialism, the genocide of indigenous populations, and the transatlantic slave trade – produced certain kinds of iconoclastic actions, responses, or representations?
- Why has the field of American art history yielded few studies of iconoclasm, compared to the interest this topic has attracted in other subfields of the discipline?