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Judith Dupré



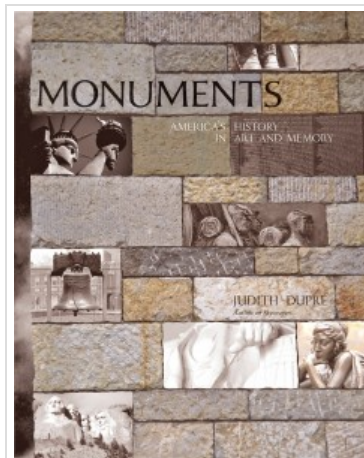
Notes on a Book Cover

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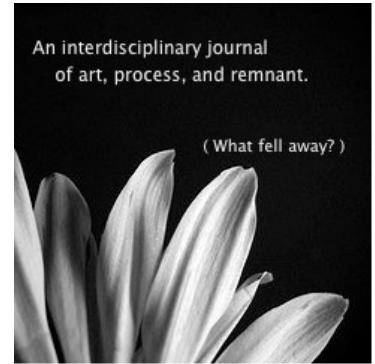
The reading public rarely suspects the blood, sweat, and tears that go into a book cover. While creating a cover that will entice bookstore browsers to pick up the book and visually convey its essence (in a glance) is more of an art than a science, the many permutations of the cover of my book, *Monuments*, will illuminate the journey that occurs before a book begins its public, published life. Like memorials encountered in the landscape, a cover design can take years to gestate, weathering conflicting opinions about how it should look and whom and what it should address, ever vulnerable to budget and construction considerations. Whether a book or a monument, the final product is ultimately a story of the journey—circuitous, strenuous, serendipitous, and often untold—that brought it into being.

It would be misleading to suggest that *Monuments'* cover had a straightforward evolution from the first idea to the final cover. In this case, it was two steps forward, one step back as I circled around various cover elements, not knowing which ones would survive. Each successive cover helped me better understand commemorative design, as well as the limits and possibilities of the printed book form. The process of creating *Monuments'* cover was complicated by a plethora of circumstances, some of which naturally evolved and others that were beyond anyone's control.

As compact as a time capsule, a book jacket holds forever the memory of the brief cultural period when it was in print. —Véronique Vienne, *Chip Kidd*, 2003



MONUMENTS: AMERICA'S HISTORY IN ART AND MEMORY, final cover. Book proposed on September 10, 2001, published on November 6, 2007 (Random House. 272 pages, 250 duotone photographs, \$45.) The cover is deeply sculpted to evoke carved stone and the tactile experience of running one's fingertips over a memorial—the most ancient and enduring form of homage. Over a period of six years, and in collaboration with two successive publishers, three designers, four editors, a phalanx of production staff, and an Italian printer, the cover design saw multiple versions and variations before it was finalized.



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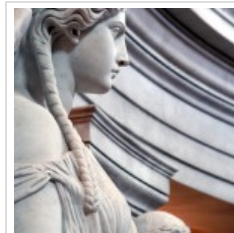
receptivity, meaning that as I actively research, write, and gather imagery, I must also wait for the arrival of the right words, images, and persons that will move the project forward. The process is much like unfolding a map square by square. Once the limits of a particular square are reached, I unfold the map to see what's next—it's an unusual way of writing nonfiction, one more closely aligned to the fictionist's quest. Similarly, my covers and interior imagery are not merely illustrations intended to elaborate what is already described in the text, but stand alone as original evidence.

In the early stages of writing, I become sensitive to possible cover images, looking for the "face" of the book as one would scan a crowd for the face of a friend (and generally anguishing until I see it). When I encounter an image or treatment that might work, I experience a distinct physical sensation—something clicks into knowingness. Soon after proposing *Monuments*, I found *Loud Whispers*, an exhibition catalog of Nancy Grossman's sculpture that was published by the [Michael Rosenfeld Gallery](#) and printed by [Oceanic Graphic Printing](#). I was immediately intrigued by its cover treatment, a sculptural replica of a Grossman assemblage of weathered wood, peeling paper, and pieces of metal type. Spot varnishes increased its three-dimensional feel. I liked the physicality of the catalog, its thingliness, the way it ignited the desire to touch—as one would trace the carved inscription on a memorial, running one's fingers over the names of the dead. Because HarperCollins, a large trade publisher, was printing the book, and I'm adamant about keeping my books affordable, creating a cover with the same physicality seemed too labor intensive and costly for a trade publication (as opposed to a limited edition or artist's book). Reluctantly, I put *Loud Whispers* on a shelf where it waited patiently for five years. Its title would prove prescient.



LOUD WHISPERS (2000), a catalog of Nancy's Grossman's sculpture, was an early inspiration.

Monuments' initial focus was much broader and included landmark memorials from around the globe. One of the first cover concepts was based on [Lee Sandstead](#)'s sensual image of the marble caryatids that stand in silent witness around Napoleon's tomb at Les Invalides in Paris. By their stance and sober facial expressions, these classical female figures instruct the public on how to approach and respond to the dictator's memory. This idea of witness—that there was a way of perceiving and behaving around monuments—would remain with me. But witnessing left out an important aspect of the relationship of the contemporary viewer to the monument, namely, individual interaction and cathartic engagement with the past.

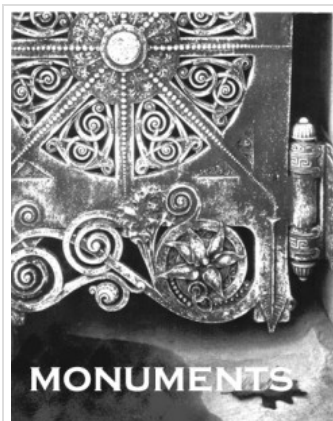


Lee Sandstead's stunning photograph of the caryatids that surround Napoleon's tomb in Paris inspired the initial cover concept. Photo courtesy Lee Sandstead.

Staffing changes at HarperCollins influenced the book's editorial content. With Editor #2 now on board, the content was pared down to American monuments only, the idea being that civic monuments reflect national values and, to a large extent, are nation-specific. Although it was hard eliminating the work I had already completed on foreign monuments, it was a relief to narrow down the book's burgeoning contents. Alas, Napoleon's tomb, along with his lovely caryatids, was out.

[Letter to XYZ Industries, producer of holograms, December 16, 2002]:

I am eager to discover a unique cover treatment that would relate to Monuments' central idea, which is memory, and how the past is remembered and commemorated in the present. Since memory is a selective, subjective thing, I feel a holographic cover might effectively convey that ambiguous place where history and remembrance meet.



As photographed by John Szarkowski, Louis Sullivan's 1890 design for Carrie Eliza Getty's mausoleum at Chicago's Graceland Cemetery conveyed both transience and transcendence. It was an image of final passage, a literal portal that also had an organic, persistent liveliness. I liked the image's delicate materiality and timeless gravitas, and mocked it up as a cover.

And so I fell down the rabbit hole of reflective covers, spending the better part of a year exploring the possibilities of holographic and lenticular photos, mylar covers, and even mirrors. A cover image that appeared to be in a constant state of flux would make a point about the limits of memory and how the passage of



time blurs recollection of the past, and of course make literal reference to the individual. The lenticular cover idea had me in touch with paper designers in Singapore, Nebraska, and Ireland. A dead end, but I gained a whole new appreciation for Pokemon cards. The handful of vintage mirrored covers I saw at bookstores, however, were badly scuffed and even the new ones looked shopworn. Later, when *Time Magazine* used a reflective cover on their 2006 [Person of the Year: You](#) issue, the effect felt cheesy, and I was glad not to have pursued a mirrored cover.



Monuments require telling a story in visual shorthand that must endure for generations. Stone carver Nick Benson cut 4,682 letters for the twenty-two inscriptions on the National WWII Memorial on the National Mall, and also lettered MONUMENTS' title.



JUDITH DUPRE

MONUMENTS

The first sales blad featured Daniel Chester French's majestic Seated Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial (1922). Random House's sales force found the cover confusing—readers might think the book was only about Lincoln or the Lincoln Memorial—so it was scrapped. The final cover retained Nick Benson's title lettering and Lincoln's clenched fist.

2003 marked a turning point. In February, I went to the [MacDowell Colony](#) in

Peterborough, New Hampshire for a month-long artist's residency. There, writing about the [Vietnam Veterans Memorial](#), I realized that Maya Lin's genius was in creating a literal and metaphoric blank slate. It is impossible to read the 58,000 plus names incised into the Wall's intersecting, polished black granite wings without seeing your own image reflected back at you. These ghostly reflections are also reminders that Vietnam was the first television war, the first to be broadcast into living rooms on black-and-white television sets, the first to press its grainy, spectral face upon the American public. It is an immensely personal memorial where people leave cryptic offerings and make rubbings of the inscribed names of the dead. Shaped by any given individual's perception and bodily reflection, its meaning is not tied to any one meaning or individual.

One day, needing to physically experience the memorials I was writing about, I decided to cut a tomb out of the deep, frozen snow in MacDowell's woods. At the last moment, I threw in evergreen branches to relieve



The grave of Daniel Chester French (1850-1931) is minimally adorned with a laurel wreath, and inscribed with his name, dates, and a simple epitaph, "A heritage of beauty."

some of the tomb's bleakness. The branches looked hopeful, matching my growing awareness that monuments were not about death, as I had first thought, but about life. When I pilgrimaged to the [Sleepy Hollow Cemetery](#) in Concord, Massachusetts a few months later to visit the gravesite of Daniel Chester French, I had a hard time finding it. The life of this eminent nineteenth-century American sculptor, best known for his Seated Lincoln inside the Lincoln Memorial, who had done so much to visually define America's emergence onto the global stage, is commemorated with a humble slab set so low on the earth that it is nearly invisible. It is a blank slate like the Vietnam Wall, with a single laurel wreath, traditionally a symbol of athletic or military victory, on top. Maybe the book's cover should be similarly minimal, and allow the reader's imagination free rein.



In 2003, I cut a 6 x 3' tomb from the deep snow at the MacDowell Colony. What I took from the daylong excavation was the image of the single pine branch rising determinedly from the depths of the tomb.

At this point, my thinking ran in two parallel paths. I wanted the cover to engage the individual and feel personal to every reader, and to convey timelessness. Over the years it took to write *Monuments*, I visited hundreds of memorials, many constructed of stone. Naturally, I touched them, and was struck by how smooth, almost flesh-like, old stones can feel. Exploring materials that could replicate the feeling of stone led me to rubber casting. Inspired by the evergreens in the MacDowell tomb, French's grave ornament, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial's minimalist design, I conceived a cover that was to be cast in rubber with deeply incised lettering.

It is darkness-light, darkness-light, darkness-light, darkness-light.

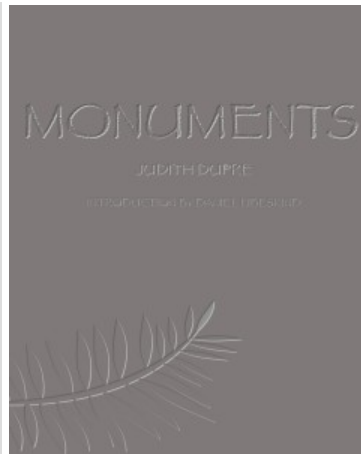
—Louis Kahn, *Architecture: Silence and Light*, 1970

It is well known in the

publishing industry that heads roll, frequently and without explanation, at HarperCollins. In the space of one breathtaking week, HarperCollins cancelled *Monuments* and [Random House](#) purchased it. A new editor, new designer, and new life infused the project.

It's a reverse of what the romantic Germans thought—that the most ethereal art was music and therefore was closest to spirituality. On the contrary, what is heaviest, what is the most burdensome, what is written in stone, gives us a form of liberty. —Daniel Libeskind, interview with the author, 2003

Tracing one's fingertips over a name that has been cut into stone is an innately human and compelling act, a timeless action that transcends language. I went to Washington, D.C. to [interview](#) stone carver [Nicholas Benson](#), who was in the process of carving the [National World War II Memorial](#)'s vast inscriptional program. Crucial to the life of a "lapidary letter"—a letter carved in stone—is an understanding of how a given type face holds light. Inscribed letters contain light variously depending on how the stone's interior is cut and abraded. In large scale public works, one's gaze shifts constantly between the magnitude and complexity of the overall text and the individual letters. While a wisp of a serif can determine the character of an entire alphabet, the inscriptionist also must envision how a letter/word/text block will look from ten, twenty, or a hundred feet away. I was delighted when Nick offered to letter *Monuments*' title.



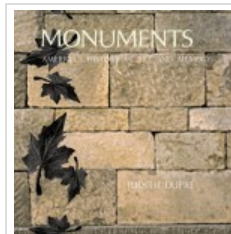
A rubber cover would replicate the feel of stone that had worn smooth over the years. The cost of making a rubber cast, estimated at twenty thousand dollars, and design's esoteric minimalism put an end to this cover idea. Architect Daniel Libeskind, master planner for Ground Zero, had agreed to do an introductory interview, but, over the years, it became clear that the plans in lower Manhattan were still evolving. I folded Libeskind's remarks into the editorial content and used a laurel wreath in the book's colophon.



The venerable stones on MONUMENTS' cover were harvested in China by a Seattle company and made into a wall that was located on the East Coast, just ten minutes from my studio!

A *New York Times* article about master mason and entrepreneur Richard Rhodes introduced me to [Rhodes Architectural Stone](#). Rhodes, realizing that acres of ancient stone would be lost once the opening of the [Three Gorges Dam](#) submerged the villages along China's Yangtze River, made an agreement with the Chinese government to harvest the stone. The stones, some over three thousand years old, had been polished by the hundreds of thousands of feet that had trod over them, gaining a patina that cannot be manufactured. Once we decided to try for a cover that looked like it was made of stone, I went to the Rhodes site to

find a particular color of stone. Instead, I saw an image of a wall made of the ancient Chinese stones that would work better than a single field of stone.



Cutouts of Karl Blossfeldt's stylized botanical photographs, in this case, his image of white bryony, relieved the starkness of the stone wall, and had the hopeful lyricism that I had admired in the Getty and French tombs. The book also acquired a subtitle at this time.

I pulled out the *Loud Whispers* catalog. Finally, the cover had entered its last phase.



First-century Roman funerary portraits in the Metropolitan Museum's collection reminded me of

Editorial changes continued apace. The color cover, along with 250 interior color images, had to be adjusted once the editor decided that a wholly black-and-white book would better convey the gravitas of its subject matter. My efforts to remove the phrase "Author of *Skyscrapers*" from the cover, a commercial reference that I felt was antithetical to its dignity, were unsuccessful.

Allison Russo, the book's designer, masterfully created a double-layer cover that hovers over an ethereal background of sky, visible along the book's left margin.

The final cover consists of two layers: a



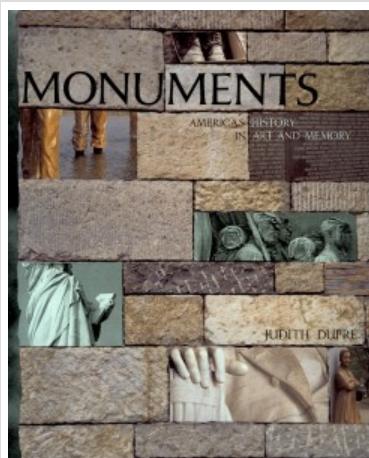
boxy, vintage television sets, and factored into the final cover design.

The final cover consists of two layers: a lower photographic collage of memorial images and an upper layer of heavy board printed with an image of a stone wall. The upper board is deeply debossed (indented

into the surface) to give the stones texture; the title lettering is similarly debossed, to replicate carving. The lower memorial collage is an amalgam, combining snippet views of triumphal, nationalistic monuments and those of quieter, psychological works that show the human cost of conflict. The format of these images followed the rectangular, horizontal coursing of the stone wall, and referenced both ancient Roman funerary monuments and contemporary HD television screens. The wall openings acted as windows on the past and into the future.



Inspired by the Roman funerary portraits, I asked the designer to replace some of the stones with photographs of monuments.



A late, color version of the cover featured glimpses of well-known monuments, including General Douglas "I shall return" MacArthur's legs, the Statue of Liberty's torso, and Abraham Lincoln's fingertips. A brilliant teaser, the memorial fragments conjured the tenuous, polymorphous nature of memory, but the publisher deemed them "body parts," too grisly and inaccessible for the public.

When you tear off the shrink wrap covering a book, yours are usually the first human hands to touch the object! Typically, the book has gone from author to editor to designer to printer to bookstore without anyone actually touching the thing itself. This is not the case with *Monuments*. The upper board of each cover was hand-glued into place, in effect making every book one of a kind—no small feat for a trade publication with a large print run. In hindsight, the cover, though beautiful and evocative of an actual encounter with a monument, did not factor in the limits of digital imaging: today, the majority of book buyers do not experience a book firsthand, but see a two-dimensional image online (as you are experiencing it at this moment) of what is in fact a three-dimensional cover.

In the end, we attempted not an interpretative but a semantic use of materials and typography. *Monuments'* cover, ruggedly fabricated to replicate cut stone, acknowledges the monumental sculptures within its pages and underscores the emotion arising from a physical confrontation with these forms. You can run your fingers along the cover's deeply incised title lettering and textured stones. As hoped, many people have exclaimed upon picking up the book, "I feel like I'm holding a piece of a monument!" The carved cover image cannot be duplicated on a computer screen, however. Its meaning can only be

experienced when you hold the book in your hands, and make it your own. ♦



Judith Dupré's bestselling books, *Skyscrapers*, *Bridges*, *Churches*, and *Monuments* explore the worlds of art, photography, and architecture in ways that delight and educate. Currently, at the [Institute of Sacred Music](#) at [Yale Divinity School](#), she is investigating the influence of time, memory, and beauty on sacred architecture. For more information, visit judithdupre.com

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