

The Thierry Henry statue: a hollow icon

“The statues are another development in our ongoing programme to commemorate significant Arsenal moments, matches and individuals and make Emirates Stadium an inspiring place for us all.”

In December 2011 Arsenal FC unveiled statues of Thierry Henry, Tony Adams and Herbert Chapman. With over 50 statues of association footballers and managers erected in the UK in the past 20 years, the Arsenal triumvirate are on first sight just another manifestation of this fashion. Our paper draws upon a detailed examination of the Arsenal statues and a complete record of the preceding UK football statuary to show that the conventional figurative statue of Henry actually represents a stark divergence in subject selection and design; one that points towards a new and nuanced use of this art form to inspire ‘us all’.

Football statues, particularly those erected by clubs themselves, have typically celebrated loyal players and successful managers who performed 35-45 years prior to their commemoration¹. By harking back to a mythical golden age, evoking childhood memories of middle-aged supporters, creating a desire to pilgrimage², and proclaiming a depth of history, they market the club to a specific demographic group through nostalgia and authenticity.

However Henry is the first contemporary icon depicted, a choice that brands through projecting style and glamour rather than nostalgia, and speaks directly to younger supporters without requiring translation by an older generation. The unusually low plinth and crouched pose invite interactivity. The design supports the theory of statues as hollow icons that can be filled with multiple meanings³. To casual or prospective fans and sports tourists, a recognisable international celebrity footballer in triumphant pose emanates reflected glory. Yet the lack of interpretative material and a partisan flashbulb memory design portraying a goal celebration against rivals Tottenham Hotspur limit full interpretation to ‘hardcore’ fans, thus enhancing both their perception of ownership of the statue and their status as ‘true supporters’.

¹ Stride, C.B., Thomas, F.E., Wilson, J.P. & Pahigian, J. (in press) Modeling stadia statue subject choice in the US baseball and English soccer. *Journal of Quantitative Analysis in Sports*.

² Pascal, V.J., Sprott, D.E. & Muehling, D.D.. (2002) 'The Influence of Evoked Nostalgia on Consumers' Responses in Advertising: An Exploratory Study'. *Journal of Current Issues and Research in Advertising*. 24: 39-49.

³ Osmond, G., Phillips, M.G. & O'Neill, M. (2006) "'Putting up Your Dukes': Statues, Social Memory and Duke Paoa Kahanamoku." *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 23, 1: 82-103.