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January 27, 2023

The Past, Present, and Future of the Davis Centennial Seal



According to the artist, Susan Shelton, the circular design of the seal symbolizes a bicycle, with the ten sections of the seal broken up by “spokes.”

Next to Mishka’s Cafe in downtown Davis, a bronze seal awaits curious onlookers waiting for their coffee, and anyone interested in local history who happens to be strolling by. [The story of where this seal rests, and how it came into being](#), is—in true Davis fashion—a story of cooperation, ingenuity, and local politics. The seal raises several fundamental questions: how can art help us commemorate the

past? What is the purpose of a centennial? And, more specifically, how can the Davis centennial seal be interpreted going forward?

These are lofty questions. However, the seal deserves serious reflection. This is a public history project which invites onlookers to grapple with a central problem: how should towns commemorate complicated pasts? In this short essay, I invite you to explore how the seal arrived where it did, and how best we can make use of it to interpret the history of Davis. Like everything else in history, the seal's story is unfinished, even if it is very much embedded in the ground. How we make sense of the seal will determine its cultural lifespan—the impact it has on local policy, education, and culture— in the years and decades to come.

Commemorating [the centennial of Davis' founding](#), in 1917, the seal was designed by [Susan Shelton, a UC Davis graduate and a Davis resident](#). The story of how the seal came into being demonstrates the linkages between UC Davis and the city of Davis, the inspiration of a local artist, and the organizational efforts of a number of key supporters.

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As the centennial of Davis' founding approached, set for 2017, Rachel Hartsough thought about how the centennial could be commemorated. Hartsough, the Arts & Culture Manager at the City of Davis, began conversations with Shelton about what the commemoration could look like. Over the course of several years, slowed by a pandemic, Shelton designed and produced what became a 6.5 foot bronze seal, featuring panels that represent various aspects of Davis' history, as well as the natural history of the wildlife that surrounds us here in Yolo County.

The resulting seal features radiating rings dedicated to various themes, organizations, inventions, and natural environments. Shelton notes that the seal highlights a number of themes that are “integral to our identity as a proud, forward-thinking, and idealistic city... *Aspiration; Community; Cooperation; Compassion; Leadership; Innovation; Engagement; Global Citizenship; Stewardship; Vision; Optimism.*” The outermost ring of the seal represents Putah Creek and “honors the native habitat and original inhabitants of this land,” members of the Patwin tribes.

Amid the ongoing pandemic, Hartsough worked with Bill and Nancy Roe, local civic leaders and longtime Davis residents, to fundraise for the seal and landscaping surrounding the Dresbach-Hunt-Boyer House, at Second Street in downtown Davis. John Mott-Smith organized fundraising via a buy-a-brick campaign. Local residents donated money to purchase bricks surrounding the seal, commemorating various civic leaders in Davis’ history. Mott-Smith, Shelton, and the Roe’s also organized a list of names of individuals who they honored with bricks, from the town’s first librarian—Hattie Weber—, to a darker era in the town’s history, the murder of Thong Hy Huynh, a Vietnamese Davis High School student killed in 1983 by another student. From acknowledging the town’s brightest examples of courage and innovation, to its darkest periods of racial hatred, both the seal and the bricks surrounding it aspire to present the history of Davis in a multi-faceted way.

Shelton has worked through various mediums in her career, and is a self-taught artist. Her art can be found on the UC Davis campus, at the State Capitol, and at the California Museum for History, Women, and the Arts, also in Sacramento, where her Minerva seal, pictured below, was commissioned by Maria Shriver to honor female leaders in California’s history.



See: <https://susanshelton.com/Seals/The-Minerva-Seal> for a description of the project by Shelton.

Shelton's work on the seal built upon her experience with these projects, but it also drew upon much broader sources of inspiration. She notes [on her website](#) that her work reflects "her cultural heritage as a native of Mexico, her love for her adopted home of California, and her educational background in science." She graduated with a degree in Nutrition from UC Davis in 1981, and her interests in science and the natural world can be seen throughout the seal.

Note for instance, in this panel, the migratory birds. Shelton used this panel to illustrate Davis' location along the Pacific Flyway, one of the major North-South migratory routes for birds in North America.



The vegetation also calls to mind the Arboretum on the UC Davis campus, as well as the marshes of the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area. See also the two sections, below, picturing some of the flora and fauna commonly found in the Arboretum and in areas around Davis.





References to agriculture also highlight Davis' origins and prominence today as a site of agricultural innovation. See this part of the panel, where we see a bird flying above agricultural fields extending west from Davis towards the Berryessa Gap and Lake Berryessa.



Again, in this ring, we can see Davis' most famous quadruped—the cow—displayed next to crops and a sign reading, "Davisville," the original name of the town.



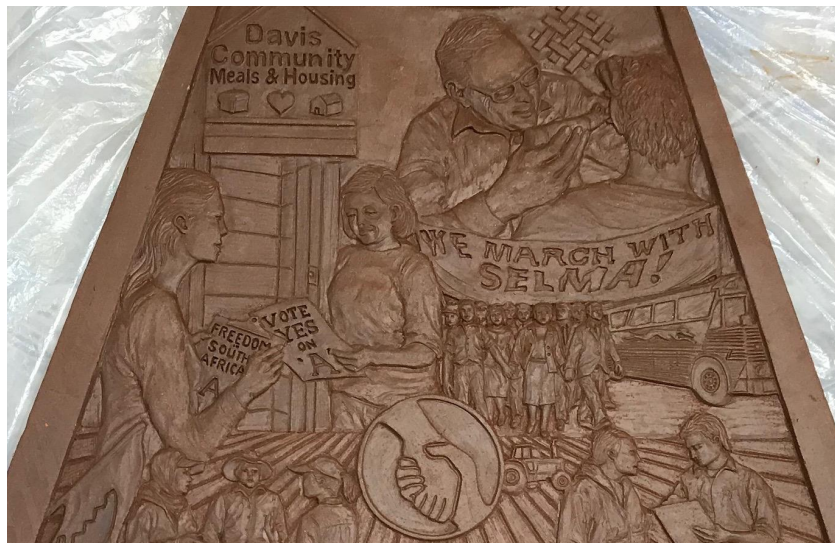
Through visual references to animals and plants of various kinds, Shelton highlights the interplay between the human and non-human world in Davis, and in California as a whole. The interconnectedness of our town's development with the natural world is critical to recognize, especially today, when climate change threatens the crops, animals, and plants that call this part of the world home. Shelton seems to be putting forth a vision for a commemoration of Davis that honors its environmental history, and not just its "great men and women."

There are not many individuals depicted on the seal, and this was a conscious choice by Shelton. Instead of highlighting a few prominent leaders of Davis, Shelton sought to emphasize social and political themes in the history of the town and the university, from its bike lanes to its agriculture to its scientific innovation. We are left with a more democratic and cooperative vision for the town's

history and its future, one which aligns with the town's many cooperative institutions, from its grocery store to its houses to its on-campus dorms.

Shelton's thoughtful artistic process can be seen throughout the seal. As part of her research process, she dove into books on Davis' history, and this process of reading and learning about the town resulted in a more nuanced depiction of the many people who have made Davis their home. She does not shy away from the more brutal aspects of California's history. In one panel, we can see a depiction of a Spanish missionary, holding a cross with blood dripping from it to the earth below. This representation seeks to remember the Indigenous lives lost to Spanish (and, later, United States) colonization, during the Mission period of California's history.

Ultimately, however, the centennial seal puts forward an optimistic vision for Davis' future. Throughout the town's history, residents have aspired to community organizing at the local and national level. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, for instance, Davis residents traveled by bus to Selma, Alabama to participate in the 1965 Voting Rights March, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called for voting rights for African Americans. This was a movement which led to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, an act which has more recently been targeted by Republican politicians. We can see this depiction of Davis' residents boarding buses to Selma, below.



In their own way, then, Davis residents participated in broadening democratic possibility at a critical moment in the nation's history, and, through this participation, showed the connections between civil rights struggles in the United States South and in the American West.

In the future, Shelton, Hartsough, and other project supporters hope that the public space surrounding the seal can be “activated” through concerts, and through outreach to local students and teachers, who can use the seal in their lessons on local history. [This website](#) provides an overview of the seal, and curriculum has also been designed for elementary and high school students getting to know their town. Once the seal was installed, in 2021, it had a soft grand opening. The pandemic made in-person celebrations of any kind impossible, and, unfortunately, this resulted in less public knowledge of the seal.

One hundred years from now, what will the seal look like? What will Davis look like? In the year 2117, one can hope for a bicentennial that remembers and reinterprets the images of the seal. In

2123, assuming that humanity has responded adequately to the climate crisis, may the seal continue to inspire those Davis residents who walk down Second Street. While the Davis of the next century will undoubtedly look quite different from the town and its environs today, it is likely that the seal will remain where it rests, in the ground next to Mishka's. Here, the seal will have a vantage point for the social, environmental, and economic changes that will inevitably occur over the next century.

Will Davis remain the educational hub it has long been, through its partnership with UC Davis? Will the Arboretum, Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, and the Sacramento Valley, as a whole, be protected from the ravages of climate change? How will local residents work to address the inevitable impacts of climate change, when these do occur? How will Davis residents address the problem of homelessness, and the housing crisis, which itself is linked to broader injustices and inequalities across the political-economy?

I started this essay with a series of rather philosophical questions about the importance of centennials and the questions that this seal raises. And, in true History student/teacher fashion, I'm ending this essay with perhaps more questions than I started with. We can imagine various futures for the Davis of 2117, for this state, and for the country and world. The seal, in this regard, can play an instructive role. The more that we take seriously the themes and problems presented by the seal, and what they suggest about our town's history and its future, the more that our children and grandchildren may be able to enjoy the bicentennial instead of bemoaning what might have been.

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